

Coaches, show character to build character

To Coaches Everywhere,

I'd just picked up the ball, dodged many defenders, and made it to the goal. With nothing between me and scoring but the goalie, I passed to another player in a worse position because he was our shooter, and I knew coach would excoriate me otherwise. So, I gave it away. As I came off the field, I heard "great job passing! I was [expletive] in my pants that you might shoot!" What a gut punch.

I used to play loose, confident in myself without worrying about failing. When I did, I felt great. I would push my limits and realize all my athletic ability without doubt dominating my thoughts.

Coaches, the doubt in my mind looks and sounds just like many of you. My uncertainty is you showing up in my head, nagging about whether I can get around a defender, yelling at me when I consider shooting, and berating me when I try something and fail. This self-doubt is sarcastic and clouds my thoughts when I'm trying to play. Once it wakes up, it's hard to quiet—it's hard to quiet you. You have the power to summon this doubting-self in your players or silence it and bring out the best.

In fact, some of you change players' lives for the better, instilling confidence, discipline, and a love of the game. Others, unfortunately, do the opposite—breaking spirits, crushing confidence, and driving kids away from sports altogether. Some of you will haunt us throughout life.

The worst coaching comes from unchecked ambition. Ambitious coaches hurt players when they value winning above development, favoring short-term victories over long-term growth.

Dad-coaches can also be problematic when they prioritize their own kid's success over others.

Coaches who run for-profit programs are another issue. Winning attracts more paying players, and some coaches prioritize revenue over real development. True growth takes patience, repetition, and failure—things that don't always look great on a scoreboard or the bottom line. Too often, these coaches focus only on the most naturally gifted athletes, leaving the rest behind, in order to build a better reputation and expand their club.

And then there are the coaches who permit cliques, creating an exclusive inner circle of favored players while alienating the rest. These coaches act more like immature children than the mentors they are supposed to be.

Sarcastic coaches, however, are the worst offenders. I speak from experience. I once had a coach who sarcastically asked me if I was stupid (I'm not). But his constant criticism made me question myself. It wasn't constructive—it was demoralizing.

Coaches, you are more than strategists and trainers—you are our leaders. Your words matter. Your attitude matters. The way you treat every player (not just the stars) matters. Winning is great, but developing confident, resilient young people best serves all of those kids you signed up to help.

Be the kind of coach who breeds confidence and puts players first, no matter their ability, and leave your ambition, greed, and sarcasm off the field.

Sincerely,
A Player Who Remembers

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