

CHAPTER 7

Respect Between Players and Coach



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. . . Rational beings are called persons inasmuch as their nature already marks them out as ends in themselves, i.e., as something which is not to be used merely as means, and hence, there is imposed thereby a limit on all arbitrary use of such beings, which are thus objects of respect.

—Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*
(Ellington translation)

I had hated him at times during training camp and I had hated him at times during the season, but I knew how much he had done for us, and I knew how much he cared about us.

—Jerry Kramer on Vince Lombardi

Imagine this situation. At the beginning of the game a junior college basketball coach tells the point guard not to take a shot without first making a pass. The point guard is the star of the team and the high scorer almost every game, but the coach explains that he needs to get the rest of the team involved in the offense. If you run the offense, the coach explains, the ball will come back to you plenty of times, and for open shots. The first time down, the point guard crosses the line and jacks one up from two steps behind the circle. As he runs by the bench getting back on defense, the coach jumps up and yells at him to run the offense, make the first pass. The player yells an obscenity back at the coach loud enough for half the gym to hear.

Well, we asked you to imagine this situation—but, in fact, it's not an imaginary situation. It happened pretty much as we just described it. And this sort of thing happens all too often. The end of the story is even worse than the beginning. The coach, knowing that the team had no chance to win without the star player, put up with this disrespect. He left the player in the game, and the player continued to disregard the coach's instructions. The player failed to exhibit respect for his coach, and the coach failed to demand respect from the player.

Now imagine this scenario. The high school softball team plays for the district title against their arch rival. After three losing seasons in a row, the coach wants this title desperately. There's even talk around town that if she doesn't win district this year, she might be looking for a job. But the arch rival has one of the best pitchers in the state. The girls get the bat on the ball, but only get three hits, one of them a perfect leadoff bunt. They advance one of the runners to third, but never score. One girl gets thrown out at second on a steal that the coach called. They

play flawless defense. Their pitcher throws a brilliant five-hitter, and the arch rival scores one run. They lose a hard-fought, well-played game. Back in the locker room after the game, the coach goes ballistic. She tells her players that they didn't want it bad enough, calls them a bunch of babies. She yells at the player she sent down to second, telling her she's so slow she looks like a pregnant turtle running. "You're pathetic!" she yells, then storms out of the locker room.

This coach failed to show respect for her players. But in order to deserve the respect that you should demand from your players, you have to treat them with respect. Disrespect for players, as we'll see, can take many forms. The abusive coach who is more concerned about his or her own record is the obvious case, but the coach who simply doesn't care is equally disrespectful. One of our students recently told us that his high school golf coach would play a round with his buddies while the players were competing in match play, totally ignoring them.

In this chapter, we'll discuss the role of the coach in a team effort first, then the respect of players for the coach, and, finally, the respect of the coach for the players.

THE ROLE OF THE COACH

Just as players, by the very nature of competition, must respect the authority of officials, they must respect the authority of their coach. Authority is the legitimate use of power over others. The abuse of that power sometimes tempts us to believe that all authority is a bad thing, and that we should seek coach-player, teacher-student, and parent-child relationships that are free of authority. The truth is, if you're a coach, you have authority over the players. It can be shaped and developed in different ways, but it can't be avoided. For a coach, just as for a teacher or parent, to renounce authority is to abdicate responsibility. We'll first discuss the authority of the coach and the respect players must have for that authority, but only as a prelude to a discussion of the coach's responsibilities to the players, which, as we've mentioned, we'll discuss in the final section of this chapter.

Part of the authority of a coach comes from the nature of sport. In a team sport especially, many of the decisions, by the very nature of the game, must be made *on behalf of the team* by a coach. If you've ever played in a basketball league on a team without a coach, you know the advantage of having a coach decide who goes in the game and when, what defense to play, or who should take the last shot in a close game. Ten or fifteen people can't make split-second decisions of that nature—they all want to be in the game or they wouldn't be there, and

they all were hall-of-fame coaches in a previous life. In that sense, a coach is an integral *part* of a team effort. The authority of the coach to make decisions on behalf of the whole team is greater than that of any of the players, but the coach's authority derives from the nature of a team effort.

But the authority of a scholastic coach, and therefore the responsibility, is far greater. Whatever the entertainment and financial value of school athletics, there can be only one justification for schools fielding athletic teams—the educational value of participating on those teams for the students. Scholastic coaches are first and foremost educators, teachers of young people. They must understand the place of sport within an academic setting—but that means more than merely keeping sport from interfering with academics. It means that sport ought to *contribute* to the educational goals of the school. If coaches are often granted greater authority over young people's lives and greater autonomy in their work than other teachers (a discrepancy that probably bears some serious rethinking), that should mean, not that winning football games is more important than learning geometry, but that coaches have a greater responsibility to broadly influence the lives of students. Simply put: more authority, more responsibility. As we discussed in part I, teachers of all kinds are moral educators, whether they acknowledge it or not, but there's certainly no getting around it for coaches.

THE PLAYERS' RESPECT FOR THE COACH

Because of the role of the coach, as an integral part of a team effort and as an educator, one of the principles of sportsmanship must be respect for the coach. For some group efforts, freewheeling discussion makes sense; for some, a commanding officer, a leader, a coach is essential. Team efforts in athletics require both discussion and the leadership and authority of a coach, and a sense for which is appropriate when. Just as a team cannot truly be a team without the respect of teammates for each other, without the players' respect for the coach there cannot be a team. They don't necessarily have to "like" the coach, but they do have to respect the coach—which means that they have to treat their coach with respect. Although as a player I may not be blessed with a John Wooden or a Bud Wilkinson, the underlying principle of my relationship to my coach is respect. I may disagree with particular decisions, and I may even express that disagreement; but, if I agree to play the game, to be on the team, I have to understand and respect the role of the coach in my team's effort to win.

If a coach goes beyond the bounds of propriety, I may quit the team or even work for that coach's removal; but, otherwise, this is the coach I'm stuck with, and my respect for him or her is essential for a team effort to work. Many a parent, and maybe a few athletic directors, have correctly pointed out to a disgruntled young athlete that learning to work with a bad coach is not unlike a good many situations in life. Of course, many a parent has worked to undermine the authority of a coach, and, needless to say, in youth athletics the support of parents is essential. Support here primarily means staying out of the way and letting the child have the experience of playing on a team and playing for a coach, even a difficult one. It ought to be sobering for the players to recognize that the coach is stuck with all of them as well. And it may sometimes be sobering to find out that the coach turned out to know what was what, even if it wasn't obvious at the time. One of the rewarding experiences for a coach occurs when the former players become coaches themselves and come back to confess their newfound respect for the coach who once, supposedly, made their lives miserable. Just as it is helpful for players to try to see the game through the officials' eyes, they need the perspective of seeing it through their coach's eyes as well.

Respect for a scholastic coach is also respect for a teacher. Again, I may not think the world of the particular moral educator I've been blessed or cursed with. We can all cite counterexamples of coaches who build bad character, but the truth is, most coaches, like most teachers, are individuals who've dedicated their lives to the education of young people, sometimes with great reward, sometimes not. Coaches, like teachers, are fallible human beings, but by virtue of the role they've been willing to accept, they deserve the benefit of the doubt with regard to respect.

Of course, the principle of respect for coaches as teachers throws us back into our chicken-and-the-egg educational situation again. If that respect has declined, it's because we haven't taught respect. The upshot of this discussion is that it is the responsibility of coaches to teach respect for legitimate authority in part by demanding respect for themselves as coaches and as educators. Anything less teaches disrespect. To say that kids now don't respond to authority as previous generations did is probably true; but that means it must be taught—creatively, perceptively—but taught. A part of teaching respect is to teach what counts as *treating* someone with respect. As we'll discuss in the next section, respect is based in part on understanding and perception, on an evaluation of merit, but it's also partly a matter of habit and practice, a matter of ingrained character. In some cases, treating a person with respect is no longer the reasonable thing to do—

in the late 30s and early 40s, for example, Adolf Hitler deserved nothing but contempt—but, generally speaking, treating people with respect is a good habit to cultivate.

In this arena, the two extreme approaches to sport we discussed in chapter 2 manifest themselves as *undercoaching* and *overcoaching*. We'll have something to say about overcoaching in the next section. Undercoaching means abdicating the responsibility of authority, restructuring the coach-player relationship so that the coach has less responsibility, especially as an educator. There are many versions of responsible coaching, just as there are many personalities—some of them Bobby Knight ferocious and some of them John Wooden saintly—but a coach who accepts the responsibility that comes with the coaching territory must structure the coach-player relationship as a relationship of authority. It may become a friendship, but it's closer to parenthood.

Thus far we've emphasized the need for a coach to *demand* respect. Of course, a big piece of this puzzle is still missing. A coach who doesn't demand respect of the players is shying away from the responsibilities of coaching; but a coach who merely demands it will fail to get it. With the demand for respect comes the responsibility to be worthy of it. When you answer to the first kid who extends the respect of calling you "coach," you've made a commitment to return that respect. We've dwelled so long on the authority of coaches because the only reason to grant authority to coaches is in order for them to contribute to the education of our children. Underlying the principle of respect for coaches, however, is the respect that all educators should have for the potential of their students to learn.

TIME-OUT *for Reflection*

- Can you think of examples you have experienced or witnessed of players showing disrespect for a coach?
 - Do you allow players to call you by your first name? What form of address do you require of them?
 - List some forms of showing respect to the coach that you think are appropriate for a coach to demand of players up front. List some forms of showing respect for the coach that could only be expected as a result of the coach's having earned respect.
 - How do you draw the line between demanding proper respect and excessive authoritarianism? Can you think of examples of each?
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THE COACH'S RESPECT FOR THE PLAYERS

What, then, do you owe the players in order to be worthy of their respect? You owe it to them to know and teach the game and to understand, teach, and exhibit the virtue of sportsmanship. Anything less is undercoaching. By the same token, you owe it to them to resist the temptation to overcoach. In other words, you owe it to them to exhibit and to teach the proper balance of seriousness and playfulness that athletic competition calls for.

Knowing and Teaching the Game

If coaches, as an integral part of a team effort, must make decisions on behalf of the team, then they have to know the game. And that means no matter how well you know the sport, you owe it to the players to be a lifelong student of the game—of its new developments as well as its old nuances. We know of no sport that any one individual has understood perfectly. And, in some cases, you may have been hired as an assistant football coach, but the school decides to field varsity golf teams and you get the assignment. You know the word “birdie” is used in a peculiar way in the golf world, but beyond that, not much. You can't fake it with kids who know the game, but, within the constraints of your other responsibilities, you can make a commitment to learn the game. There's a big difference between walking out on the green and saying, “I'm new at this game, but I'm going to learn it as fast as I can,” and saying, “This isn't my main job, so you'll pretty much be on your own.” Coaches have a responsibility to know, and therefore to learn, their game. The split-second decision of a coach who is clueless about the game is hardly an improvement on all the players talking at once. Better no coach than a clueless one.

Coaches must be students of the game in order to make coaching decisions based on sound knowledge, and, especially in school athletics, they must be students of the game because they have a responsibility to teach the game to the players. Respect for the players as students of the game, as young people with the potential to learn, means that scholastic coaches are never just recruiters. And, indeed, one of the most exciting aspects of coaching young people is to see them develop as players. Every coach should look in the mirror at the end of each year and ask these questions: Are my players better at the game than they were at the beginning of the year? Are their skills better? Do they understand it better? Have they learned the game?

That's not an easy task, because teaching the game is not an easy task. Some players want to learn, love to learn; some are convinced that they know everything there is to know. Some positively resist

instruction, refuse to take seriously the practice drills that develop skills, prefer to look cool rather than poised. Respect for the players' potential to learn, then, doesn't mean giving them whatever they happen to want, because some of them will want to play the game without learning it. The one advantage a coach has over other teachers, though, is that there is a clearly defined goal that all of the players want, namely, to win.

TIME-OUT *for Reflection*

- What does it mean to be a “student of the game”? Are you a student of the game? What do you do to keep learning your game?
 - Do coaches have an obligation to attend coaching clinics and meetings in order to gain knowledge about their sport? To read the latest literature on their sport?
 - Are your players more knowledgeable about the game after playing for you for a season? After playing for you for several years?
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Understanding, Teaching, and Exhibiting the Virtue of Sportsmanship

Coaches exhibit respect for their players and they merit the respect of their players by knowing and teaching the game. But the responsibility runs deeper than that. If you think about the nature of competition, and about its role within an educational setting, if you *understand* what it means to compete, you will recognize that respect for your players means, above all, taking responsibility for teaching them the principles of sportsmanship. How? Depending on the age and the character of the players, the balance will differ; but teaching sportsmanship will always involve some combination of explicit instruction, example, and opportunities for practice.

Coach Skeptical: If my job depends on winning the district title, I don't have time to set aside for sportsmanship lessons. Every minute I'm allowed to spend with my players—and there's not enough time as it is—I need to be concentrating on playing the game well.

First of all, if you think about what it means to play the game, then sportsmanship is part of playing it well. But we also want to be clear here: We're not talking about setting aside separate practice sessions

on sportsmanship. In talking about explicit instruction, setting an example, and practicing sportsmanship, what we're really asking you to do is to coach in light of the principles of sportsmanship—to run your drills and practices and coach the games in light of these principles. It won't take extra time, and it won't distract from your efforts to win—it might mean that you'll do the things you've always done differently, though.

Teaching by Explicit Instruction. Talk about sportsmanship. Explain it. Don't assume that kids can't understand. Why should you treat an opponent with respect? Because no opponent, no game. Do you want to play the game or not? Do you get something out of playing the game or not? Direct moral exhortation alone is not enough, but in this age of compulsive psychological engineering, it's often short-changed. Tell them something's wrong or right, tell them why it's wrong or right, and say it like you mean it. Sometimes it's a real eye-opener for them.

When asked what he told his athletes, Brutus Hamilton, the head coach of the U.S. track and field team for the 1952 Olympic Games, said:

The gist of my talks with the boys can be reduced to a few simple words, "Honor yourselves, your country, and your opponents with your very best performances and with your very best behavior." (Walton, p. 105)

Depending on the coach and the situation, saying it like you mean it might involve a reserved seriousness—or it might involve some heartfelt shouting. If you do express anger at players, a good self-check is to ask yourself if you're yelling at them because they lost a game or kicked a ground ball—or because they did something unsportsmanlike. Did they make a mistake or did they do something *wrong*? If they lost the game or dropped the fly because they made a halfhearted effort, that's an issue of sportsmanship; but if they played the game or went for the ball with all of the skill they possess (that is, that you've taught them), and they still lost or flubbed it, then what's the point of treating them as if they did something morally wrong? Ask yourself if you're really mad at them because they did something wrong—or if you're mad because *you* didn't get to chalk up another one in the win column? Are you yelling at them to show everybody in the stands that it's their fault, not yours—or to teach them?

Teaching by Example. Preaching without practicing what you preach is better than neither, especially if you're occasionally honest enough to admit that you didn't live up to what you preach. But the example that coaches set in the arena of sportsmanship cannot be overestimated. If you insist that the players "behave"—that is, at least on the surface, appear to respect opponents, teammates, officials, and

their coach—but they see you treat others with nothing but disrespect, the lesson is all too clear. What they learn is that when they get to be the one in charge, they can treat others any way they want to. It's only when someone with power over them forces them to behave this way that they should do it, not because it's better or because they'll be better human beings for doing it.

What will players make of your demand that they treat the officials with respect when you repeatedly do the opposite? The coach in most sports may, by custom at least, have a special license to complain to the officials, but a coach can complain in ways that are consistent with respect for the norms of civil discourse—as opposed to complaining in ways that show no understanding of the nature of competition. What will players make of your demand for respect when, even at the deepest level, you treat them with disrespect? There's no denying that coaches have a special authority over players that players don't have over them, which means that coaches must sometimes make decisions that are unpopular with the players. But the question still remains: Do you exercise your authority in ways consistent with respect for your players, as students of the game and of life, as fellow human beings, as kids with the potential to learn?

On this score, we recommend the proverbial conversation with the mirror after every practice and every game. The appropriate question: What did my behavior teach them about sportsmanship?

Practicing Sportsmanship. If sportsmanship is a virtue, it can be practiced. Coaches have a responsibility to make the workouts as well as the games occasions for the practice of sportsmanship. Every good coach knows that even though an occasional light workout is a good idea, generally speaking, halfhearted efforts in daily practices will become a habit of halfheartedness that translates into halfhearted efforts in competition. Likewise, even though occasionally allowing players to let off steam in practice is probably a good idea, if you allow your players to show disrespect for opponents, teammates, or the game in daily practice you'll find that they have developed the habit of disrespect. If it's OK for them to throw their rackets when they're playing a teammate in a practice match, then how could it not be OK to do it during a match? Even if it's not OK, it's a tough habit to break. Not many people know that when Bjorn Borg started playing tennis as a teenager in Sweden, he had a bad temper. After one outburst on the court, his coach sent him home for a couple of weeks and told him that when he came back one more episode would result in a permanent expulsion from the tennis club. As most people know, no tennis player in the history of the game conducted himself with greater dignity than Bjorn Borg did during his career.

TIME-OUT *for Reflection*

- Is the teaching of sportsmanship a part of your coaching? What are the specific ways in which you reinforce the value of sportsmanship?
 - Do you discuss issues of sportsmanship with your players? At the beginning of the season? When the occasion calls for it? When stories hit the news about famous athletes acting in a particularly sportsmanlike or unsportsmanlike fashion, do you discuss these events with your players?
 - In what ways do you set a good example for sportsmanlike behavior? In what ways do you set a bad example?
 - Do you allow unsportsmanlike behavior in practice that you wouldn't allow in a game? What do you do in practice to help your players develop the *habit* of respect for others and for the game?
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Resisting the Temptation to Overcoach

Sometimes the expression “student-centered education,” especially at the college level where recruitment and retention of students pay the bills, means giving students whatever they want, as if they are customers of a business or consumers of a product. If consumers want cars with bright colors, who are we to question their judgment? Educating students and manufacturing cars, however, are not the same thing. Respect for the potential of young athletes to learn doesn't mean letting them do whatever they want. It necessarily means making a good many decisions for them, decisions that may not be popular, at least at the time. Otherwise, it makes no sense to say that teachers teach students.

But there is a great danger that we will forget the purpose of making these decisions. Education is an inescapably paternalistic undertaking—that is, it involves teachers making decisions on behalf of students—but it is a paradoxical sort of paternalism. To some extent, it always involves making decisions *for* students, but the purpose of this paternalism is to *educate* them, that is, to bring them to the point at which they can make responsible decisions for themselves. The goal of educational paternalism, like the goal of parental paternalism, is eventually to make itself superfluous.

The tremendous amount of authority that is typically vested in coaches makes it easy for coaches to forget the ultimate goal of this

authority. The primary reason for the existence of a scholastic athletic program is the education of young athletes. If you forget that, you can easily come to think that you have this special authority because you're the one who ultimately matters, that the whole team exists for your sake. Then you start to make decisions for the team that will serve your own ends—to advance your own career, to impress local boosters, to inflate your ego. If you do a good job, your career ought to advance, local boosters ought to be impressed, and you should be proud of your accomplishments. It bears mentioning, however, that there is a difference between being proud and being egotistical.

Simply put, the coach can become more important than the players. It's interesting to note the way in which so many of the rule changes of the past few decades, especially in college sports, have made the coach increasingly more important, to the extent that in big-time college athletics the coach often becomes the focus of the whole enterprise. The winning-is-everything attitude very often is related to the overemphasis on the importance of the coach. All too often, for the coach, winning is the sole yardstick of worth. Job, salary, prestige—the win column for the coach has repercussions beyond the playing field. The mirror check on this issue: Am I here for the players, as their coach and teacher—or are they here for me? Am I teaching them or exploiting them?

One of the results of overemphasis on the importance of the coach is the temptation to overcoach. If your record, your career, or your ego becomes the focus of your effort, then it's tempting to make all the decisions for the players, to provide all of the energy and spirit—even if it's the spirit of fear. If your win-loss record is all-important, then you're going to make sure that everything gets done that needs to get done, whether your doing it is in the best interest of the players' education or not. But if you remember that the ultimate purpose is to help your players grow into autonomous adults, at some point you have to let them make the decisions, make the mistakes, make what you've taught them their own. Somewhere along the line, you have to recede as a teacher of the game; you have to fall back into your role as the coach who is an integral part of a team effort; and you have to let them play the game. It is revealing that we talk about the win-loss records of coaches, when in fact, strictly speaking, coaches don't win or lose, teams do. Coaches coach; and, strictly speaking, the players play the game.

TIME-OUT *for Reflection*

- Think of specific examples of ways a coach in your sport can be tempted to overcoach.
 - Think of specific ways a coach in your sport can allow players more responsibility. For example, should a scholastic baseball coach call all of the pitches for a catcher and pitcher?
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Exhibiting and Teaching the Proper Balance of Playfulness and Seriousness

In effect, then, you demonstrate respect for your players by exhibiting the proper balance of playfulness and seriousness in your own behavior. Coaches who don't take the responsibilities of coaching seriously enough undercoach; coaches who take themselves too seriously, who place too much importance on themselves and not enough on the education of the players, overcoach. Like parents, coaches can err in both directions. You can become so accommodating, like car manufacturers responding to market trends, that you abdicate your responsibility; and you can become so authoritarian that you abuse the legitimate authority vested in you.

In finding this balance, you must be truthful about yourself, specifically, about your own abilities and limitations. Different people will, and should, find different ways of handling the responsibilities of coaching, of showing respect for the players. Some coaches are going to be more playful than others, and some more serious than others. But the basic principle of finding a proper balance is still the goal. During the mirror checks, some coaches need to say "Lighten up," and others, "Get serious."

For those who need to lighten up, one way to gain a perspective on this balance is to view sport in relation to the rest of life, as we'll discuss in chapter 8. To the athletes on the playing field, the game is everything, and seriousness about competition requires that we don't step on the field unless we intend to give it all we've got; but, at the same time, we'd do well to consider the outcome of a high school football game or swimming meet alongside, say, men, women, and children dying in the car bombing of a federal building in Oklahoma City, scientists trying to discover a cure for AIDS, teenagers dying in drive-by shootings in cities all over the nation, and families driven from their homes, tortured, and murdered in the civil war in Bosnia.

It's a game, coach. Sport isn't everything. It's an avenue to some very important things for many people; but there are other avenues.

TIME-OUT *for Reflection*

- In chapter 2, in which we first introduced the notion of a balance between playfulness and seriousness, we asked you a series of questions about what you actually do to promote this balance. What sorts of things could you do that you don't currently do to achieve this balance in yourself and to teach it to your players?
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WRAP-UP

The relationship between coach and players is special. Depending on the personalities, the age of the players, and the particular sport, that relationship can take many forms. But what we've tried to argue in this chapter is that the foundation of that relationship must be reciprocal respect. That respect, like the respect for opponents, teammates, and officials, is based on the nature of athletic competition and the role that the coach plays in a team effort. And, because the coach in a scholastic setting is an educator in the broadest sense of the word, the responsibility for building this relationship of respect is even greater.