



BETTER ATHLETES
BETTER PEOPLE

Good Coaches Get Players Into Games

By Jim Thompson, Founder and CEO, Positive Coaching Alliance

Playing time is probably the biggest source of frustration and anger among sports parents, which is saying a lot.

An Unarguable Point

Kids love to play. They don't like to sit on the bench. Moreover, most of the benefits of playing a sport are tied to competing in games. Kids who sit benefit less from sports than kids who play. I don't see how anyone can argue with this.

Good Coaches Get Kids into Games

It is a tenet of good coaching that you get kids into games! Period. Whether there are any external rules for minimum playing time or not. Whether it is at the high school or highly competitive travel team level or not.

Good coaches get kids into games! They may be creative about how they get kids into games in high-stakes situations, because a Double-Goal Coach® does want to win. But a good coach – a Double-Goal Coach – gets kids into games! Have I made myself clear?

The Mad Dogs

A creative idea for getting kids into games came from an Ohio high school basketball coach who took his bottom 8–12 players and termed them the "Mad Dogs." The Mad Dogs knew they would play the last minute of the first quarter and the first minute of the second quarter in EVERY game, whether preseason or the state title game. This accomplished a number of things:

- Unlike typical bench players, the Mad Dogs worked extremely hard in practice because they wanted to be ready for their moment. This pushed the starters to play harder, which benefited the team on the scoreboard.
- They played all out during their two minutes. They were all over the court and had no hesitation about being highly aggressive. Over time, the coach told me, they became a competitive advantage, with the team being in a better competitive position after the Mad Dogs exited the game than before they entered.
- Some of the Mad Dogs became starters. The self-confidence they developed helped them develop a sense of possibility of themselves as starters! And when an individual latches onto a sense of possibility, watch out!

The Utility of Blowout Games

Good coaches use blowout games to get kids into games, but they do so BEFORE the game becomes a blowout. Good coaches recognize a mismatch coming up and start kids who normally don't start. If that puts their team at a competitive disadvantage, so much the better for the starters to come into the game behind, having to work hard to catch up. If the blowout is a blowout even with the subs starting, at least the subs know they played when the game was still at stake.

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Good Coaches Get Players Into Games, continued

Coaching for Effort

A word about the primacy of effort: If there were only one life lesson from sports it should be that hard work is a key to success. I once coined the "equation," **S=E/T, Success comes from Effort over Time**, and drilled it into my players every day. We might not win today, but if we give it our best effort, sooner or later, we'll be successful.

Good coaches in high-stakes situations should reward effort as much as talent. It is impossible to overstate the power of the message sent to the team when a weaker player who gives it her all gets into games on a regular basis. The message to a team when a weaker player who gives it her all gets into games on a regular basis is impossible to overstate.

Weaker players realize that they can get into games if they work hard. They don't have to be as good as the best players on the team, they just have to outwork them! This is incredibly motivating to your weaker players.

And it is a wake-up call for your stronger players, who will find their playing time limited if they don't up their effort level.

What's a Parent To Do?

What is a parent to do when your child does NOT have a good coach who gets kids into games?

- 1) Check out the ground rules. Are there any playing time rules in this program? If not, go to the leadership of the program to propose this.
- 2) Check it out with your child. Is your son upset by not playing? Ask him how he feels about this. Whatever you do, don't exclude him from the process and complain to the coach without consulting your child.
- 3) Cut out the middleman (that's you!). Instead of talking to the coach, encourage your child to approach the coach. Parents complaining to coaches about their child's playing time rarely has good results. On the other hand, coaches almost always respond well to a player who comes to them saying, "Coach, I'd like to play more. What can I do to get more playing time?"
- 4) Find out your options. Is there another program (perhaps one affiliated with Positive Coaching Alliance) that recognizes the importance of playing time for every athlete? If all else fails, and your kid is still sitting on the bench all the time, vote with your feet. Take your child to a better program.

A Final Thought

Coaches of selective teams where playing time is not guaranteed need to be clear about this. Much negativity results from parents being disappointed when their (perhaps unrealistic) expectations about their child's playing time are not met.

Coaches, be absolutely clear at the beginning. Tell parents and players what they can expect in terms of playing time before they sign on to the team. If you are not going to get kids in the game unless you are confident they will contribute to a win on the scoreboard, say that at the beginning. It will save you a lot of grief down the road.