

Why We Coach

(Hint: It's not for the ring)



April - 2015

This Sunday marks the first regular season game of the 2015 season of Yavneh Youth League (YYL), a shomer shabbat softball league that serves over 360 elementary school age children and their families from across 15 schools and 17 towns in the area. While games start now, administrators and coaches have been preparing for the season for months. In March, coaches from among the 28 YYL teams gathered for the annual coaches dinner and meeting, to talk about plans for the upcoming season. The below is an excerpt of what was said to YYL coaches at that meeting. It is being shared here in the hope that the reminder improves the experience for YYL players and for children in all recreational leagues :

To our YYL Coaches :

The administrators of YYL started getting together in November of 2014 to plan out this year's season. Steve Wechsler, David Markowitz, John Lofstock, Michael Berman and I have been working hard to get things ready. Most of the hard planning is done and we are well prepared to start another great season for all of our families - hold that thought... We are only the "back office" support staff for what YYL does. But you, the coaches, are the

front office professionals – where ‘bat meets ball’ for YYL. You all are the day to day face of the league, so whether this season will actually will be a great one or not is really dependent on to each of you. But even that is not quite true. Because there is not just a single great season to be had. There are 365 seasons in the making. 365 players, each one a child, who will be the judges.

It’s kind of cold out now, but in a few short months, the YYL season will be over. For some children, it will have been great. There will be spectacular plays made. Each week will reveal new heros and new players with game winning RBI’s, clutch pitching performances, or game saving catches. I know that most of the children will have fun – and I hope it will be all of them. But I’ve been running this league for a long time, and I know that there will also be some children, many new to the league, that will start this season not believing in themselves. They will be thinking they have nothing to contribute, and feeling that their best effort will only disappoint others. Those kids might not really want to play this year, here or anywhere. I’ve had the opportunity to coach players like that and if you’ve been coaching for a while, I bet you have too whether you knew it or not. And that is what I want all of us to think about for a few minutes tonight.

Coaches each have at least one of their children on their teams, but for the Administrators, just 4 of our combined 18 children even remain the YYL divisions we run, so it’s worth it to start by thinking about what it is that keeps us involved with YYL: why David inventories, packs and lugs heavy equipment bags across Bergen County; why John spends every Sunday morning teaching over 50 first graders - none his own - the basics of the sport; why Michael Berman runs training sessions with our High School age umpires in his dining room reviewing the finer points of each division’s rules and the even finer points about how to interact with adults who may disagree with their best calls, when he’ll have none of the kids in any games; why Steve spends his nights planning out a game schedule that successfully navigates through Bat Mitzvahs, class trips, and the like; why I spend the hours when none of my kids will even take a single swing in YYL this year. Why do we build this league from nearly the ground up every single season and why have we stayed with it well past (most of) our primes ?

And the answer is not because we just love to watch grade school kids play softball. It's entertaining at times and often the play is just great, but there are much easier and enjoyable ways to spend Sunday mornings and late nights in between. Maybe even with our own families..

It's because we know that there is something much bigger underneath it all.

We stay with YYL because we believe - we know - that every child can grow from the experience of being part of a team. We do it because we believe that we can perennially build an environment where children are exposed to coaches who care more about them than they do about winning. And that the modeling that YYL coaches will do can positively impact our players' spring, and for the occasional child, their life.

That child might not be your son or daughter, but they will be on your field somewhere this season. They are children who, to be candid, think that they stink at sports and that because of that, they cannot contribute to their team's success. And maybe, in truth, they aren't all that great at softball. Maybe they can't yet field a grounder cleanly, mitt down, bent at the knees. Perhaps they can't throw it across the diamond with power and accuracy to a waiting first baseman. They might not be able to stand in an at-bat with confidence, and drive an outside pitch hard the other way. When they run to first, they might try their best, but still lumber slowly. I promise you that that child will be on the field this season. They will play on your team, or they play against it. If you don't pay attention, you will overlook them. Or worse even, just write them off.

But just imagine what's possible. You or your co-coach might carve out a few minutes before or after a game. With your guidance, with your encouragement, and with your coaching, they might (might !) catch a pop up this year in an important spot with all eyes on them. They might somehow put the ball in play at a key time and move that winning run into scoring position. And if G-d really smiles on them one Sunday morning, they might get a high five from their teammates because, believe it or not, they actually 'did it'. Imagine that.

And even if they don't have those magic moments this spring, the words of encouragement that come from you, the support that you show and that you inspire your team to show towards all their teammates will have an impact.

And guess what. Under their baseball cap, that child will be changed - maybe imperceptibly. It might not show itself until years later, when he is faced with another challenge. Maybe she will remember their coach believing in her at a time she did not believe in herself, or that her coach had the other kids cheering for her every single time up, and told her after each and every strikeout that she would get 'em next time. And that through her coach's tone, body language, and eye contact, she'll know those weren't just empty words.

Maybe he learned that practice might not always make perfect, but it eventually pays off. Maybe when the season is over, and he goes to camp, if he does, he won't hide from sports in fear of being *found out*, because he knows that even he has something to contribute, because he once did. And maybe she will, in some small way, approach life with just a drop more confidence. And maybe he will take what he learned from you on a Sunday morning in Paramus in 2015 and pay that forward when he becomes a camp counselor, or when she is a parent herself facing the need to inspire her little girl to do her best.

You, our YYL coaches, have the most awesome opportunity. Every chance to encourage. None of the baggage that comes with actually being the parent.

That may all sound a little melodramatic. I get that, but I also know it is not an exaggeration. One of the luxuries I have as Commissioner, and probably the thing that makes the hours most worthwhile is that I get the emails that share how much the opportunity to play ball in our league means to some kids. I get them nearly every year, stories about how a shy child has come out of her shell more each week, about how YYL is what the child looked forward to all year and has been the source of such growth for him. These messages are not my imagination. Those children are in the Junior Girls and

Senior Boys divisions this year. I know their names and many of you would as well.

No doubt, some of the kids in our league are great players. I've seen plays that seemed otherwise impossible. Amazing young athletes doing incredible things on our fields that will make us all yearn for instant replay. The great players need good coaching too. But some players are not great - so they need you to be great. A coach came up to me a few days ago and told me that he expected to have a particular player, a boy whose needs are more special than most, assigned to his team again this year. It was not a statement made with resignation in his voice, but one made with excitement. He coached the boy last year and saw the impact he could have with this child and expected an opportunity to further that relationship. How can the love in that request possibly be quantified? How can we not all try to tap into that part of ourselves between now and June?

So what am I trying to say? I know most coaches are mostly coaching to share this unique experience with their children, as I did. I know some are coaching because YYL (okay, I) asked you to please coach again this year – thank you. The path to 'Coach' is no longer relevant - all that matters is what is done with that title. All that matters is that once or twice when the season gets going, each coach realizes the immense opportunity you have with our kids. The incredible chance you have to be that coach who makes a difference. To be someone who not only recognizes the immeasurable power of a well timed word of encouragement but has the wisdom and heart to apply it where it is needed most.

Come to my house and listen to my children talk with their friends about their YYL coaches over the years. Hear them chat about their elementary school coaches, and the coaches of the high school teams they play on now. Invariably, the focus will turn to the good and bad they've witnessed. What their coach said to the team after a loss, or how that coach treated the weaker players on the team vs. the stronger ones. If you've ever been to a YYL coaches meeting, then you've heard me say it: When they become young adults most players will not remember their records, the championship winners, or even the names of the teams they were on. But they will vividly

remember how their coaches conducted themselves on the field, or encouraged the children who were unsure if they were good enough. As coaches, you have the most important role in this league, and frankly the biggest opportunity. How you interact with the children on your squad will be the only 2015 YYL legacy you leave behind. I envy you while I beg you. Use the incredible opportunity you have this year to be the coach that you want to be remembered as. Because one way or the other, you will be remembered.

We have made the teams and schedules, provided the fields, the balls, and the umpires. Most of what the Administrators can do from here on in involves praying for nice weather. But unless we are coaching, we cannot do what you can. You can impact a child this spring in a way that can change him or her for the rest of their life. That girl or boy is out there. They are waiting for you. I promise you.

So we play games. We compete. There are rules and scores are kept. Some team will win their division championship, and most will not. But if even if one of us thinks for a minute that our impact this spring will be measured only in runs, outs, and hits, than we are playing the wrong game.

- With admiration for our coaches, and confidence that a great season can be had by all: Howard Eisenstadter and the Administrators of Yavneh Youth League : Michael Berman, David Markowitz, John Lofstock and Steve Wechsler.