

DODGE PRESENTS Parents' Guide To Youth Sports

Pesky Parents Can Push Quality Coaches To Quit

BY RICK WOLFF

In each of John Nicol's five years as boys' lacrosse coach at Yorktown (N.Y.) High, the Cornhuskers won the sectional championship. Under Nicol's leadership Yorktown, one of the nation's elite lacrosse programs, sent dozens of athletes on to play in college.

But the success came with a catch: a nightly stream of phone calls from parents. They would call his home to ask what he was doing to get their kids scholarships or to nag about their kids' playing time. These parents, who often took confrontational and accusatorial tones, so aggravated Nicol that he decided to leave Yorktown High. "I'd tell the kids to tell their parents not to call, and they still would," he says. "I just got fed up." Yes, even with all the wins and trophies, Nicol walked away last year.

He exemplifies an upsetting trend I've noticed. Many outstanding mentors for young athletes are leaving the youth and high school ranks not because they don't enjoy working with kids anymore. Not because they receive little or no pay for their efforts. Rather, they are hanging up their whistles just to escape the maddening barrage of calls from overly demanding parents.

Obviously, parents, you have the right to talk with the coach about what's best for your youngster. But be considerate of these men and women who dedicate so much of their time to helping your children. Remember that coaches have lives of their own.

Besides, everyone can communicate in other, more mutually beneficial ways. First, a preseason meeting can help manage expectations and answer in advance many of the questions that surface as a season goes on. All coaches should have these meetings, and all parents should attend them. (*A Preseason Meeting Can Set The Stage For Success*, Sept. 9, 2002, SI.) Also, as kids get older they—not their parents—should talk with coaches when concerns arise. Learning to stand on your own two feet is an important part of growing up. (*Let Your Athlete Resolve Problems With Coaches*, June 10, 2002, SI.)

But if parents insist on interacting directly with coaches, e-mail could be the most productive way to do so. This might sound like an overly simplified solution, but it has many advantages.

At the start of the season, the coach should still tell parents his phone number, but with a caveat: It is to be used ONLY for urgent matters requiring immediate attention. The coach will



ILLUSTRATION BY S.B. WHITEHEAD

Coaches tired of phone calls can stop the bleating by asking parents to use e-mail instead.

address all other comments, questions and concerns solely via e-mail. He should give out his address, a promise to log on as frequently as possible, and rules restricting parents to two messages per week and no more than 50 to 75 words per note.

Primarily, e-mail eliminates the emotion that often clouds conversations between parents and coaches. Fired-up parents frequently hear only what they want to hear, not the constructive criticism good coaches are trying to pass along. And embattled coaches can lose their tempers and shoot back with damaging comments, making a bad situation even worse. E-mail also provides a firm record of a discussion, which can help clear up future misunderstandings. And uncivil tones, unfounded accusations and unrealistic promises are less likely if everyone knows proof is just a print command away.

E-mail isn't a perfect solution, but it could help save the sanity of good coaches being driven to quit by overbearing parents. "The Number 1 negative part of the job is that interference," says Nicol, now a lacrosse assistant at Pace University. "It happens everywhere, and here's the bottom line: People are not knocking down doors to take these jobs. It's not worth it anymore."

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