Sport Psychology for Youth Coaches: Personal Growth to Athlete Excellence

By Frank L. Smoll and Ronald E. Smith. Published 1987 by the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry, 3900-A Harewood Rd. N.E., Washington, DC 20017. (91 pp.)

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This text was commissioned by the Athletic Ministry Committee of the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry, as noted in the preface, for use by their volunteer youth sport coaches. The authors present coaching guidelines based on their findings from an extensive series of studies conducted in the 1970s on youth sport coaches. From this research stems the Coaching Effectiveness Training program (CET), which has been presented by the authors to many youth sport coaches over recent years. Frank Smoll and Ronald Smith are thus well grounded in both theory and practice, and highly qualified to write this book.

The first three chapters describe the "why" of youth sport coaching. Chapter 1, "Athletic Competition for Children: Why Kids Sports?" provides the volunteer coach with a basic understanding of why play is important in the lives of children. A historical understanding of organized youth sport is briefly presented, followed by its proposed value. The stance of the authors is clear: youth sports have a powerful potential for achieving positive objectives in the lives of children.

"Sport Models and Goals: Kids are not Pros," the second chapter, describes the important process of modeling in youth sports. A developmental model is proposed whereby the success of young athletes is measured via individual development rather than via winning or losing. This chapter is critical to youth sport coaches because the philosophy they adopt dictates both their attitudes and behaviors toward young athletes. The four-part philosophy of winning proposed by the authors provides a sound strategy for ensuring that athletes enjoy sport and gain as many positive benefits as possible from participation.

The importance of the youth sport coach is the main subject of chapter 3, "Coaching Roles and Relationships: Influencing Young People's Lives." The influence coaches have on young athletes is discussed. The psychology of coaching is identified as "a set of strategies designed to increase your ability to positively influence others" (p. 20), a definition that reduces some of the mystique often associated with sport psychology. A brief description of the authors' research findings on coaching behavior supports the techniques proposed in the succeeding chapters.

Chapters 4 through 6 contain the "how to" of coach/athlete interactions. The guidelines from the CET program are described in chapter 4, "Behavioral Guidelines for Coaches: Applying Sport Psychology." The psychological prin-
principles underlying effective coaching are presented as a series of behavioral guidelines. The positive approach to coaching is advocated as an appropriate alternative to the often used negative approach. Young athletes are motivated through positive reinforcement.

Chapter 5 extends the behavioral guidelines proposed in chapter 4 to include the skill of communication. “Communication and Self-Awareness: Skills for Improving Coaching Effectiveness” describes a method for increasing the coach’s awareness of his or her coaching behaviors. A sample self-report form the coach can use to monitor his or her behavior is provided.

The youth sport coach is given easily administered strategies for goal setting in chapter 6. Drawing from the research, the authors interpret findings from the literature on goal setting and apply them to the youth sport setting. Entitled “Goal Setting and Feedback: Tools for Increasing Motivation and Performance,” this is a solid chapter. However, one section appears to be out of place. The section, “Reducing Stress and Building Mental Toughness,” on page 51, is more akin to the information in chapter 7 about athletic stress. Indeed, upon checking the table of contents, it appears to have been intended for chapter 7, a fact that is recognized in a note from the publisher and included in the text.

Some of the negative aspects inherent in youth sport coaching are discussed in chapters 7 and 8, as well as strategies for creating positive situations out of these negative ones. “Athletic Stress: Teaching Coping Skills to Young Athletes,” chapter 7, defines stress and its effects on young athletes. Proposed techniques for dealing with stress include developing mental toughness, defined as “a set of specific, learnable skills,” and practicing relaxation procedures.

Chapter 8, “Working Effectively With ‘Problem Athletes’: Turning Problems Into Opportunities,” is well intended. However, I have reservations about the rather clinical tone of the analyses and suggestions provided, and their appropriateness for the volunteer youth sport coach. For example, “uncoachable athletes” are described as athletes who are “frequently acting out unresolved problems in dealing with earlier authority figures” (p. 70). The authors suggest saying something like the following when talking to this type of athlete: “I have a hunch you’ve had some problems with people in authority in the past, and that these problems are coming out in this situation” (p. 71). This seems rather a strong presumption, as the youth sport coach probably has little if any information upon which to base this diagnosis except for observing the young athlete’s behavior in games or practices. Before making any assumptions about the reasons for the child’s behavior, the coach should get to know the child’s family situation. In spite of these reservations, however, I fully appreciate the authors’ intention of making the potential youth sport coach aware of the likelihood that he or she will encounter problem athletes.

Finally, “Coach-Parent Relationships: A Vital Link in Successful Youth Sport Experiences,” chapter 9, describes the other major group with whom the coach is involved. Many strategies for dealing with parents are provided, including both positive and negative aspects of parental participation in youth sports. A helpful outline is presented for conducting a parent orientation meeting. I would have appreciated a few more strategies for encouraging parents to attend this important meeting, given that this seems to be a major obstacle when planning such a meeting.