Review

*Coaching for the Love of the Game*—Jennifer Etnier.

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*Coaching for the Love of the Game* is a book for coaches who work with young athletes. The author contends that the key to coaching success is acknowledging that the reason kids play sports is to have fun. Consequently, that foundational plank should be the basis for all coaching activities and decisions.

There are several strengths to the book. It is highly readable; addresses several issues that pertain to coaching; and also discusses matters that are peripheral to coaching but important nevertheless, like dealing with different types of parents. Another value is that the book has interactive components. Readers are given questions to respond to and there is space in the book for answers to be written down. While the book is not a workbook, these fill-in sections require the serious reader to consider and articulate perspectives on coaching issues.

In addition, the author takes on—head on--right from the beginning the problematic tendency to judge coaching success on the basis of team wins and losses. Dr. Etnier is committed to undermining the notion that winning is a meaningful criterion for determining coaching success. The book has two major components; and one envelopes the other. The over-arching one is the author’s central argument: “If you want to be a great coach, then it’s not about your won loss record…Being a great coach requires that you put…athletes’ development as people above all else when you are working with them.” The other component of the book includes sections about coaching perspective and technique that facilitates “putting athletes’ development as people above all else when you are working with them.”

There are parts of the book that could be valuable or at least interesting for coaches at all levels, but the author directs the book towards youth coaches, and—it seemed to me--towards those who are just beginning to coach. It reads a bit like a primer for novices or perhaps a remedial for those who have had an initial bumpy year or two and need some guidance about how to proceed. The chapters dealing with gender differences, young athletes’ parents, and specialization vs. diversification may be particularly helpful. Also, Dr. Etnier includes activities and drills that may be valuable to young coaches who are looking for specific ways to improve or restructure practices.

I have some constructive criticisms. There are citations to support claims throughout the book, but the support is spotty. There are times when citations are supplied and other times when it is puzzling why one comment has a citation and other similar comments do not. In one section about diversification vs. specialization the author lists Michael Jordan, LeBron James, Alex Morgan, Annika Sörenstam and Wayne Gretzky as athletes who as youths pursued multiple sports. For some reason there is a citation for the statement about Morgan but nothing for the others. I’m not sure Morgan’s activity needs a citation, but if it does so do the others. There is a very interesting anecdote the author’s dissertation adviser relayed regarding youngster motivation for participating in sports. However, there needs to be some evidence provided beyond the anecdote to support the conclusion the author derives from the anecdote. Early in the book the author comments that at a big ten institution only 2 per cent of athletes earn sports scholarships but 70 percent earn academic scholarships. That stat seemed particularly odd to me so I went and checked the source cited. He did indeed make the claim. However, I went to other sources and discovered that the 70l% figure is misleading. It is possible that at some schools 70% of students or higher get some form of financial aid based on academic achievement, but this aid could be relatively minor. It is misleading to suggest that the 2% athletic scholarship stat can be meaningfully juxtaposed with the alleged 70% who may obtain some support based on academic achievement. What might be meaningful to make this point is a stat regarding the percentage of students on academic scholarships that are full rides vs the percentage of athletic scholarships that are full rides. Or the percentage of students on athletic scholarships that provide for a majority of university costs, vs the percentage of students on academic scholarships that provide that same or similar amount.

The author is to be commended for taking on squarely what she calls “the elephant in the room” that is, the idea that winning is central to coaching success. I can remember as a high school freshman basketball player being stunned when walking into an away gym’s locker room I saw the oft cited (and oft misused) Vince Lombardi comment *Winning Isn’t Everything. It’s the Only Thing* plastered in a huge banner around the entirety of the locker room.

Winning is, of course, not “the only thing” and promulgating this philosophy can be detrimental to young athletes’ enjoyment of games. In fact, Lombardi did not really mean that winning is the only thing. The author points this out by citing another quote of Lombardi’s “Winning isn’t everything, trying to win is everything.”

Dr. Etnier comments that the second quote is a “more suitable mantra” but her argument throughout the book does not support that “trying to win is everything.” She contends that striving to have fun is everything. Focusing on the love of the game is the only thing. Yes, defining success only in terms of winning as opposed to improvement is unhealthy, but it is natural to be happy when one wins. I walk around the park near my home and when little leaguers who haul around bats about their own size are victorious they sure seem happier than those who did not prevail. It is natural to enjoy winning and for winning to be a motivator for continued activity in sports. Attempting to deprogram that requires walking into a stiff headwind and, while I liked the book’s approach and consider it to be a necessary antidote to one dimensional coaching, I think acknowledging the power of winning toward the end of sports enjoyment needed to be acknowledged more explicitly.

Overall, the book has merit and I am glad I read it. There were times when the tone sounded a bit patronizing as if the readers were the children and not the coaches of children, but that was not consistent throughout the book. I think the book will be of value for those who have just started out and want some ideas about what works to improve coaching and what facilitates playing and coaching sports for the love of the game.