

Too hard on the kids? Hardly

By Tim Wendel, *USA Today* Jan 22, 2006

The lessons children learn in team sports don't leave them in adulthood. I used to coach youth ice hockey, and one of the best seminars I ever attended began with the instructor telling us, "The parent may not be your friend."

To some parents, that statement might seem outrageous. To others, perhaps it's understandable. But all parents must recognize that there's a fine line between being supportive of a child on the one hand and looking the other way when undisciplined play and immature conduct enter the equation on the other.

This is where coaches can, and should, play a role — and the sooner the better. Strong coaches, in fact, can profoundly influence these young lives. And we've seen ample reasons of late to encourage such guidance at the earliest stages of an athletic career.

The NCAA recently met with coaches and game officials in hopes of fostering better sportsmanship on the field. During the last slate of college football's bowl games, LSU and Miami brawled in the tunnel after the Peach Bowl and Virginia Tech quarterback Marcus Vick was caught on TV stomping on a Louisville defender's leg in the Gator Bowl. The foul play tarnishes the pro field as well.

"We've done a disservice to today's kids because we've never really held them accountable for their actions on the field," says Fred Engh, founder of the National Alliance for Youth Sports. "Whether it is parents or parents in the role of coaches, too many times we've told them, 'It's OK to cheat to win; it's OK to taunt; it's OK to run up the score.' "

Too protective?

As parents, we like to pretend that we know sports' real virtues, but we too often are ultra-sensitive to anything that asks too much of our kid, any coach who asks him or her to grow up.

Back in high school, my best sport was track. I loved the camaraderie and the realization that even though you just did your best, you could run even faster tomorrow or the next day.

I was also immature, though. I talked back to those in charge. My coach finally told me to straighten up or he'd kick me off the team. I was dumbfounded. Both of us knew he couldn't win the league without me on the 880-yard relay team and without my points in the long jump.

That night, at home, I asked my mother to call the coach on my behalf. To her credit, she refused.

"This is between you and him," she told me, "and you need to set it right."

I apologized to my coach, and our team went on to win the league championship.

In Michael Lewis' slim bestseller, *Coach: Lessons on the Game of Life*, it was a different story. In it, Lewis returned home to catch up with his old high school baseball coach. To Lewis' disbelief, the adult who taught him baseball and, more important, how the world works, was on the verge of being fired.

Even though Lewis' "Coach Fitz" was a legend in the New Orleans area, parents said the coach was too hard on the kids. And too intense. He asked too much of their boys on and off the field.

After a disappointing season, Fitz told one player that he "had wasted his talent to pursue a life of ease." He called another player out for promising to lose 15 pounds and gaining 10 instead. The parents didn't appreciate such honesty, no matter how accurate, and complained to school officials.

'An invisible line'

What the parents hadn't figured out, Lewis wrote, is that "an invisible line ran from the parents' desire to minimize their children's discomfort to the choices the children make in their lives."

In other words, if a coach or any adult somewhere along the line doesn't demand more out of a youngster, especially in terms of discipline and sportsmanship, the player will rarely pick it up on his own. Too many kids grow up believing that anything they do on the field is OK. In protecting them so much, parents make kids vulnerable to their own misguided actions — what the sirens of TV and the pro ranks arbitrarily deem is cool.

Whether it's college, pro or youth sports, too often coaches are forced to tread too lightly. Today's players, regardless of their level and age, are different. And that's unfortunate for everyone who loves sports.

Tim Wendel's latest book, My Man Stan, a sports novel for young readers, will be published in the spring. He's a member of USA TODAY's board of contributors.

