

# Taking The Game Back

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Sometime ago, early in my coaching career, I came across a note written by an unknown author. This note has endured many purges of mementos, poems, and quotes coaches gather along the way in their endless search for inspiration. I have shuffled this loose single piece of paper into the keep pile for over thirty years unwilling to part with its inspiration, all the while unclear of the reason...until today.

## It's Your Game

Today, I have decided to share it with you, the reader, in hopes it will provide you with both the inspiration it provided me as a young coach, and in the hope that it can be useful as a tool to help convince onlooking parents who are far too often straying out of their lane in an attempt to cajole their offspring to rise up to the challenges sport offers them as they climb their own personal mountains of potential. Well-meaning parents who unknowingly and unfortunately sometimes take the game away from the very humans they are trying to guide. These parents don't typically do this with malice. They are usually well intentioned, albeit, short sighted in their quest to see their offspring rise to the top. Additionally, this is a tool that can serve as a reminder to all the adults surrounding young athletes in a hectic, high achieving race to the top.

So often parents are acting from a place of fear. Not a fear they would recognize or consciously feel, but their behavior is often born of fear nonetheless - and this fear makes them tribal, certain, narrow focused, and less self-aware.

But this game wasn't meant for the parents on the sideline. It was meant for the players and the coaches and the officials that oversee the action. It is for the batgirls and ball boys and scorekeepers at the table. Whether this game for you includes a soccer ball or puck or while immersed in a pool, the game regardless of the sport, is true and beautiful and it belongs to the participants in the arena.

So, in honor of those who are in their seasons now and those training for seasons upcoming, this game is for you:

**"This is your game.... I hope you win.** I hope you win for your sake, not mine. Because winning is nice. It's a good feeling, like the whole world is yours. But it

passes, this feeling. And what lasts is what you have learned. And what you learn about is life. *That's what sports are all about.... Life.* The whole thing is played out in an afternoon. The happiness of life, the miseries, the joys, the heartbreaks. There's no telling whether they will toss you out in the first five minutes or whether you get to stay for the long haul. There is no telling how you will do. You might be a hero, or you might be absolutely nothing. There is just no telling. Too much depends on chance. On how the ball bounces. I'm not talking about the game; I'm talking about life. But it's life the game is all about. Just as I said. Because every game is life, and life is a game - a serious one, dead serious. But that is what you do with serious things - you do your best. You take what comes and you run with it. Winning is fun, sure, but winning is not the point. ***Wanting to win is the point. Not giving up is the point. Never letting up is the point. Never letting anyone down is the point.*** Play to win, sure, *but lose like a champion.* **Because it's not just winning those counts. What counts is the pursuit of victory with class while inspiring those around you - on the field and off. What counts is trying and failing and getting back up in the face of each failure along the way.** -Author Unknown

## It's Like They Have Dibs on Us

While conducting a volleyball culture camp at a high school in rural Wisconsin, I heard that phrase from a distressed incoming junior in high school. As a function of on-site camps, I've run with teams for the past decade there is quite a bit of culture work mixed into the on court training. In the pursuit of high performing culture, I lead student-athletes through some deep conversations. Conversations designed to hear their raw and real take on things. In this particular moment, we were talking about the stressors today's student-athletes sometimes feel. Stressors that are often overlooked or not fully appreciated by the adults in their lives. As such, I pointed out to the group that they're sometimes overscheduled. At this statement, the aforementioned junior started to laugh. She laughed really hard. She laughed like she felt the statement in her toes. Having a good repertoire with this player, I dug deeper. A treasure trove of profound observations followed.

I asked the group if this sense of feeling overscheduled is better or worse after the pandemic. The junior again spoke up, "it's worse for me. I don't know about you all," she said nodding toward her peers, "but it sort of feels like they're all trying to have dibs on us." I asked her to continue, and she went on to list, in rapid and exhausted fashion, the layout of her schedule. It went from basketball to volleyball to life to work to family. By the end she became aware of her emotion and pointed out that she was now going to cry. And folks, this was in the summer.

In another session of that same camp, a middle school aged student-athlete pointed out that it wasn't until she played volleyball, and really liked it, that she knew she was, and I'm quoting her, "supposed to actually like the sport I was playing." She had played another organized sport for three years prior to this realization. It truly didn't occur to her, for even a minute of those first three years that she should have even some enjoyment in the sport she was playing at the ages of nine, ten, and eleven. Let that sink in. I don't know of a more important objective in sport than to help athletes find their joy.

## Joy Defined

At all levels of play, joy is vital to the learning process. Let me be clear about how I am defining joy. In sport and athlete development, I believe joy is made up of two parts. Part one is the happy happy fun joy that one feels while participating. It's the laughs, goofy drills, and shared moments between the people on and around a team. The second part is growth, it's the feeling of progress and learning along the way. The goals for coaches are many, but chief among those goals should be designing their student-athletes' experiences in such a way as to help them obtain both parts of joy along their journey. If it's all happy goofy fun, they won't feel growth, but if it's all growth and challenge, they won't find fun. May you find the balance so you're never their last coach. May you help them learn about boundaries and balance so they may feel agency over their own time. May you collaborate, rather than compete, with your coaching colleagues so that in the end, we can give them their game back. May we all stop grasping for dibs on today's student-athlete.