



WINNING WAYS  
WITH  
YOUNG ATHLETES

with a foreword by  
Bud Selig, President, Milwaukee Brewers

## FOREWORD

It is often difficult to find coaches for sports involving our young people. We can find individuals with athletic experiences but without the patience and perspectives that are needed to lead participants to the more meaningful aspects of competition.

In this booklet, the concepts of respect, encouragement, support, praise, communication and discipline are explained within the context of coaching. Winning is of course the desired end result, but this booklet properly places a perspective on the need to coach more than the individual player and the game.

Coaching a major league baseball player is not much different from coaching a high school aged player or a Little Leaguer. The skill levels are different but the positive atmosphere that must be developed in order for peak performances to take place are the same. This booklet provides many tips on how to set that winning atmosphere.

Best Wishes and Good Coaching!



Allan H. (Bud) Selig  
President, Milwaukee Brewers Baseball Club

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WISCONSIN COMMITTEE FOR PREVENTION OF  
**CHILD ABUSE**

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Booklet illustrations by:  
Sally Brown/Design North Inc.

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Printed in the United States of America, Third Printing 1993

## HELP WANTED

Male or female needed to work with active young clientele.

Evening, weekend work required. Duties include teaching, organizing, motivating, giving first aid. Experience as role model, substitute parent, chauffeur a plus. Little or no pay.

Being a youth coach takes time and skill. And though the rewards aren't the kind that end up in your pocketbook, there are plenty of rewards. As a youth coach, you can watch your young athletes grow and develop, both personally and athletically, and know you played a major role.

Never underestimate your importance to the kids who play for you. Because sports are a high priority to them, you play a big part in their lives. You may be a bigger influence on them than their parents, especially if you coach adolescents!

Your athletes look up to you. What you say and think and

do matters to them. You, as a youth coach, can help shape your players' self-images, and can build their self-esteem. Your potential for positive impact on your athletes is great.

There can be a down side, though. Working with young athletes can have its trying moments. And because coaches are so important to players, negative treatment — like yelling, using sarcasm and embarrassing them — can do lasting damage.

The techniques in this booklet were developed by youth sports experts to help you with the toughest part of coaching — the psychology of working with kids and getting what you want to teach across to them. By adapting these positive coaching skills to your own personal coaching style, you can increase the enjoyment and value of the sports experience for both your players and yourself.

### THE POSITIVE APPROACH TO COACHING YOUNG ATHLETES

When working with young athletes, there are two

different methods coaches can use to influence their players.

The *Positive Approach* uses rewards and encouragement to reinforce behaviors the coach wants to see continue.

The *Negative Approach* uses punishment and criticism to eliminate undesirable behaviors.

Why should you, as a youth coach, use the Positive Approach?

- It works better with today's young athletes.
- It creates a more enjoyable climate for both players and coaches.
- It increases young athletes' natural enthusiasm for sports.
- It helps young athletes like themselves, their teammates, and their coaches better.

The *Positive Approach* to coaching youth sports has two parts — a *philosophy of winning* and an emphasis on *encouragement* and *rewarding effort*, not just performance. Punishment and criticism are avoided.

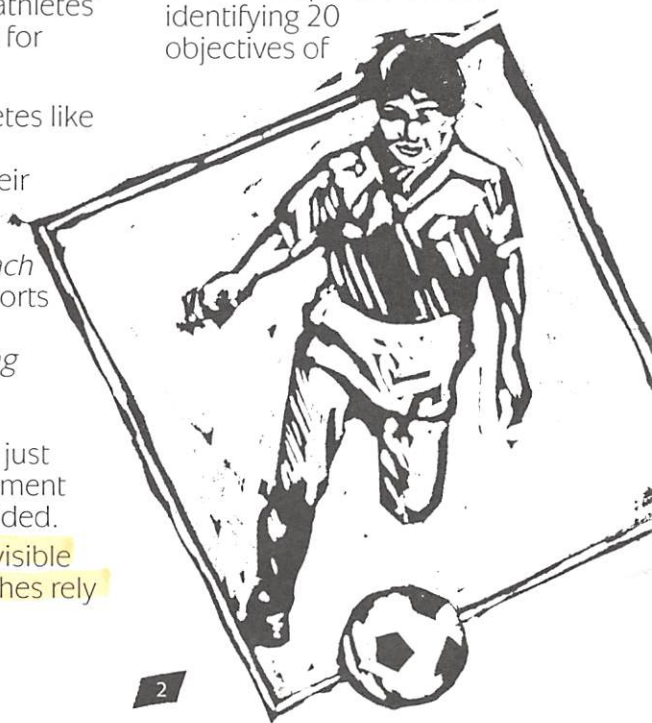
Though some very visible college and pro coaches rely

on the negative approach, young athletes have not yet developed the self-confidence to cope with it. Used with young athletes, it actually lowers self-esteem, confidence, and motivation.

The *Positive Approach* does work, and you won't be making sacrifices in the win column to use it. Put it to work for you and for your players!

## WINNING AND THE POSITIVE APPROACH

Much has been written about the many positive benefits of youth sports. One study analyzed over 400 children's sports articles, identifying 20 objectives of



youth sports. Do you know what was missing? In over 400 articles there was not one reference to winning as an objective!

Of course, winning is an important goal, too. It wouldn't be honest or fun if your team didn't try to win.

But there is a way of looking at winning that doesn't make losers of your players if the score doesn't end in their favor.

With the Positive Approach, winning is kept in perspective. The philosophy — "*athlete first, winning second*" — has many positive outcomes. Most coaches believe this, but sometimes it's tough to practice.

### WINNING—A HEALTHY PHILOSOPHY TO TEACH YOUR ATHLETES

We all know Coach Vince Lombardi's famous quote, "*Winning isn't everything; it's the only thing.*" Did you know that Lombardi was misquoted? According to his son, what he really said was, "*Winning isn't everything, but striving to win is.*" It's part of the healthy philosophy towards winning that you can teach your players.

- Winning isn't everything.

And it's not the only thing. Winning is important, but other objectives, like improved skills and better self-esteem are more important.

- Losing is not the same thing as failure. Teach your players that losing a game does not reflect on their self-worth or mean a personal failure.
- Success isn't the same as winning. The score of the game decides only who wins and loses, not who succeeds and fails. Surprisingly, winning isn't important to maintain young athletes' interest in sports, but success is.

*What, then, is success in youth sports? Success is achievement — mastering or improving a skill. Success is striving to win. Success is giving one's best effort.*

Former UCLA basketball coach John Wooden emphasized this last philosophy, saying, "*...the last thing I told my players, just prior to tip off... was, 'When the game is over, I want your head up — and I know of only one way for your head to be up — and that's for you to know that you did your best... no one*





*could do more... You made that effort."*

Athletes can control the amount of effort they give, but they have little control over the score. If you stress that players are not losers if they give their best effort, you reduce their fear of failure. They will try harder and risk error to learn, and within your players' limitations, winning will take care of itself. Honest! And kids who learn that success is achieving, trying to win and giving one's best effort will be winners, regardless of the score.

### **MAKING THE MOST OF THE GOOD PLAYS**

How often coaches reward desirable behaviors — it's the single most important difference between coaches athletes like, and those they don't like.

Use of rewards and encouragement to reinforce is the key to the Positive Approach. Used properly, reinforcement will help you strengthen the behaviors you want to develop in your players, and increase their motivation.

Here are some guidelines for reacting to good plays, and other good behaviors you want to see increase.



## **R E I N F**

- Coaches have "reward power"—use reinforcement liberally. Look for good things and reward them. You will see them increase. Mention the behavior when you reward, as an instructional reminder. ("Good job, Chris. Nice level swing.")
- Psychological rewards are effective reinforcers. A coach can reward a player with a verbal response, or with a physical response like a pat on the back, a smile, or a thumbs up sign.
- Have realistic expectations geared to individual abilities and be consistent in reinforcing achievement. When learning new skills, reinforce each time. Reward closer and closer approximations of the new skill. Once a skill is learned, rewarding once in a while is most effective.

### **MISTAKES—STEPPING STONES TO ACHIEVEMENT**

Athletes will make mistakes — they're part of learning the game. As their coach, how you react is important. Punishing for mistakes can lead to fear of failure and

## O R C E M E N T

- Reinforce right away — it's more effective. But later is better than not at all.
- Don't reward athletes if they really haven't earned it. They'll know when your praise isn't sincere.
- Reinforce and encourage effort as much as results. Whether the play is made or not, if you reward athletes when they try hard, you are encouraging maximum effort.
- Do you want to see teamwork, cooperation, and sportsmanship increase? Rewards and reinforcement encourage these behaviors, too.

Let your players know you appreciate them! The positive things you say and do stay with them and help their self-esteem.

harm a player's future performance. Your reaction to mistakes can affect how they feel about themselves, sports, and you.

When a mistake occurs...

- Give encouragement immediately; even if they

don't show it, most players are embarrassed and need the support. If your player knows how to correct the mistake, encouragement is enough.

- If it's needed, give corrective instruction — in an encouraging, positive way. After a mistake, some athletes prefer immediate feedback, while others may need some time. Just be sure not to embarrass them further by pulling them from a game to correct the error.

Experts recommend a three part approach to giving corrective instruction. This approach will help your athletes want to do things right, rather than try to avoid failure and disapproval.

1. Reward. Find something the athlete did right and compliment him or her to reinforce that behavior. ("Way to hustle.")
2. Give a constructive suggestion, emphasizing not the error, but the good things that will happen if they follow the instructions. ("Next time follow the ball all the way to the glove. Soon you'll be catching them all.")
3. Encourage. ("Stay with it! You'll improve even more if you work at it.")

- Don't be hostile or punitive when giving corrective instruction. The negative approach is more likely to lead to frustration and resentment than to improved performance.
- Don't punish for mistakes — young athletes haven't developed enough confidence yet. They respond better to the Positive Approach than to yelling or other types of disapproval. Punishment for mistakes can block learning, making your athletes afraid to try, and even your best athletes may start to play it safe.
- Words aren't the only way you communicate with your athletes. 85% of communication is non-verbal. Though your words may be positive, be sure your body language and tone of voice aren't sending them a different message.

Coach John Wooden called mistakes “*stepping stones to achievement*.” By teaching your athletes that mistakes are not to be feared, that they are a way to improve performance, your players will accept and learn from their mistakes. And they won't be afraid to try.

## COPING WITH MISBEHAVIOR AND LACK OF ATTENTION

How to prevent misbehavior is the question most coaches want answered. You know that maintaining good discipline is important for a team, and that it's best to deal with it early in the season. But first, keep in mind two things:

- *Your players are not mini-adults. Expect them to want to have fun and be active.*
- *Expect your athletes to test their limits, especially if you are coaching pre-adolescents or adolescents. It's a natural part of the maturation process. Even though they will test you, they really do want limits and structure.*

Here are some ways to provide that structure without having to yell, threaten, or act like a drill sergeant.

- Establish clear expectations right away.
- Hold a team meeting to involve your players in deciding reasonable team rules and consequences for breaking them. Cooperation is more likely if your athletes helped form and publicly agreed to the rules. Discuss rules you think are





important, and the reasons for them, but be willing to listen to their ideas as well.

- Try to balance structure with a bit of freedom. Remember your players are there to have fun.
- Reinforce and encourage desirable behaviors like teamwork, sportmanship, cooperation, respect for officials, support for teammates, and "being in the game" while on the bench. Rewards can help build team spirit and unity, too.

What to do about team rule violations and refusal to cooperate...

- Give the player one warning.
- Give your athlete a chance to explain. There may be a good reason for the action.
- Be consistent and impartial— yes, even if you have to bench your star goalie!
- Stay cool and calm. Don't show anger or be punitive.
- Avoid lecturing or embarrassing the player. It isn't necessary or helpful.
- Stress that the player is paying a penalty because a team rule was broken, not because of you. This keeps the responsibility on the athlete, where it belongs.
- Once the disciplinary time is over, accept the player as part of the team again.

What types of penalties should be given for misbehaviors and rule violations?

Depriving the player of something he or she values is best. Some ideas are:

- sitting off to the side — a time out or penalty box.
- losing playing time.
- losing a starting position.

Be sure to follow through, no matter who the player is!

Experts do not recommend running laps, doing push-ups or other physical exercise to punish athletes. It could teach them to dislike beneficial physical activities.

## NOTE...

Sometimes it's best to simply ignore behaviors, rather than reward or punish. At times, punishment gives athletes the attention they are seeking, and it will actually encourage the behavior. If you ignore the behavior, it usually disappears. This works best for your players who may be looking for attention by clowning around.

## DISCIPLINE AND PUNISHMENT—WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

Though the Positive Approach discourages punishment, maintaining discipline is a must in youth sports. What's the difference between the two?

Discipline techniques include:

*setting limits on behavior*



*making rules simple, few, and consistent*

*being a role model for appropriate behavior*

*ignoring annoying behaviors that do not cause real problems*

With discipline, you help your athletes:

*know what is expected*

*control and change their own behavior*

*become responsible for their own actions*

*learn a lesson that will positively affect their future behavior*



*increase feelings of self-worth and self-confidence*

Punishment techniques include:

*yelling  
lecturing  
sarcasm  
threats*

*use of physical force*

Use of punishment:

*emphasizes athletes' failures*

*leads to resentment and frustration*

*destroys self-esteem and self-confidence*

*does not teach athletes to become responsible for their own behavior*

The Positive Approach, with its emphasis on discipline, will help you establish better control over your athletes and build in your athletes the character traits most adults want to see developed.

#### CREATING A POSITIVE LEARNING ATMOSPHERE

Coaches are teachers, too. A positive learning atmosphere will help you develop your players' athletic skills, an all-important goal of young athletes. Your ability to help them improve their skills is a key to winning their respect.

- Recognize each player at least once during a practice or game. Usually the top athletes or the goof-offs get plenty of attention. Be sure the others do, too.
- When giving instructions, be sure you have their attention first. Then be clear, concise, and technically at their level. Telling a ten-year-old, "When the end blocks down, you fill," produces confusion, not results.

- When teaching a skill, first make sure they can see you. Then:

- 1.) Demonstrate the skill; tell them what to look for.
- 2.) Give a brief explanation.
- 3.) Have your players practice the skill.

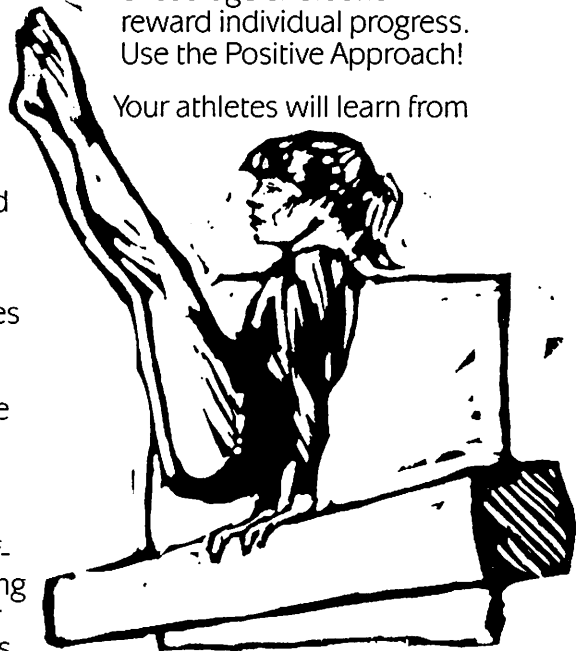
A complex skill may need to be broken down into parts to be taught.

- Be patient. Young athletes think slower than adults. Also, expect gradual skill improvement, with some leveling-off periods.
- Communicate with consistency. Telling your young athletes to be self-confident, and then yelling at them, destroying their confidence in themselves, is confusing.
- Avoid using sarcasm with young athletes. You may not intend it to be harmful, but it is often misunderstood.
- During a game, wait for a break in play or a time-out to give coaching instructions. Otherwise, you may break their concentration and hurt their performance.
- Be a good listener — be open to your athletes.
- An athlete who has a bad game or practice needs

support and encouragement. Be sure to give it before the player leaves.

- And last, remember to encourage effort and reward individual progress. Use the Positive Approach!

Your athletes will learn from



you in another way, too. You are a role model for your players, who have very high regard for you. Set a good example for the behaviors you want to encourage. By showing respect for others, being positive and confident, and accepting your own mistakes, you will be teaching your young athletes to do the same.

## MOTIVATING YOUR ATHLETES

As coach, you have a major role in your players' motivation. Though

motivation should come from within, learning why kids participate can help you maintain and enhance your players' natural enthusiasm for sports.

Young people participate in sports for many reasons. According to the *Handbook for Youth Sports Coaches*, the top four are:

*to have fun*

*to improve and learn skills*

*to be with friends*

*to succeed or win*

With this in mind, how can you enhance your players' motivation?

- Know your players as individuals, and why they are playing. This could give you the key to what will work with them, or why they are having problems.
- Teach them that success and winning are not the same. Success is improving and mastering skills, striving to win, and trying to do one's best. If you encourage and reward effort, you can help your athletes experience success, regardless of ability.
- Make practices fun by involving all your players as much as possible, with lots of active time. Use short, snappy, varied drills.

This will cut down on misbehavior, too. Idle time gives them time to get into trouble.

- Tailor skills to ability levels. Activities should be challenging without being boring or too difficult.
- Give your athletes a chance to play in each game, and not only in the closing moments. In several studies, 90% of the children chose playing and losing over winning and warming the bench.
- Help them learn and improve their skills in the sport, a major goal of young athletes. Even if an athlete will never be a "star," and most won't, he or she will feel pride in improving.
- Help them set realistic individual performance goals. Athletes with personal goals will work harder and longer. Find out from your players what they want to work on. You will find short term goals most effective. Be sure to give feedback and when they meet goals, reward them.
- **USE THE POSITIVE APPROACH TO COACHING!** This is the single most important influence on young athletes' motivation.



## FEAR OF FAILURE

You will be working with two different kinds of athletes, who are motivated in two different ways.

*Achievement-oriented athletes* want to succeed; they peak under pressure. *Failure-oriented athletes* worry that they won't perform well. They dread critical situations, and the possible disapproval of their coach, parents, and teammates. They fear failure, and are motivated to avoid it.

Athletes who fear failure may try to protect their self-worth by putting forth only token effort. This way they think others won't find out about their "lack of ability." This can frustrate you, and coaches often mistake this lack of effort as lack of motivation.

Fear of failure can be the major obstacle to athletes' success in sports. It can:

*hurt performance*

*ruin fun*

*keep them from trying*

How can you reduce fear of failure in your players?

- Encourage and reward effort and individual skill improvement.
- Eliminate pep talks that overemphasize winning instead of *striving* to win. You don't want your players to link their self-worth with winning and losing.
- Be a good role model. Accept and admit your own mistakes.
- Again, **USE THE POSITIVE APPROACH**. It creates positive motivation, not fear of failure.

## TO KEEP IN MIND

Some situations and experiences with young athletes can prove frustrating for coaches. The following examples from youth coaching books may help you better understand why these situations occur and reduce your frustration level.

*"She did it so well in practice. How could she blow it in the game?"*

The stress of the game situation may cause even your top athletes to regress to an earlier skill level. This can be frustrating when you've seen them do it well in practice. Lots of practice on the skill, until it becomes habit, will help.

*"Why does he even bother to*

*come out for sports? He doesn't seem to care whether he's here or not."*

These players may have both a low motivation to achieve, and a low fear of failure. In other words, they don't care if they succeed and they aren't worried about failing either. The best way to handle this type of athlete is to ignore behaviors, unless they are disruptive or violate a rule.

*"Trying to get these kids to learn these plays is like beating my head against a brick wall. They don't seem to understand what they're supposed to be doing at all."*

Right! Young children do have trouble learning complex plays that require lots of teamwork. Since understanding the plays is difficult for them, rote memory is the key.

*"It's hard to believe these kids are all twelve — they're so different."*

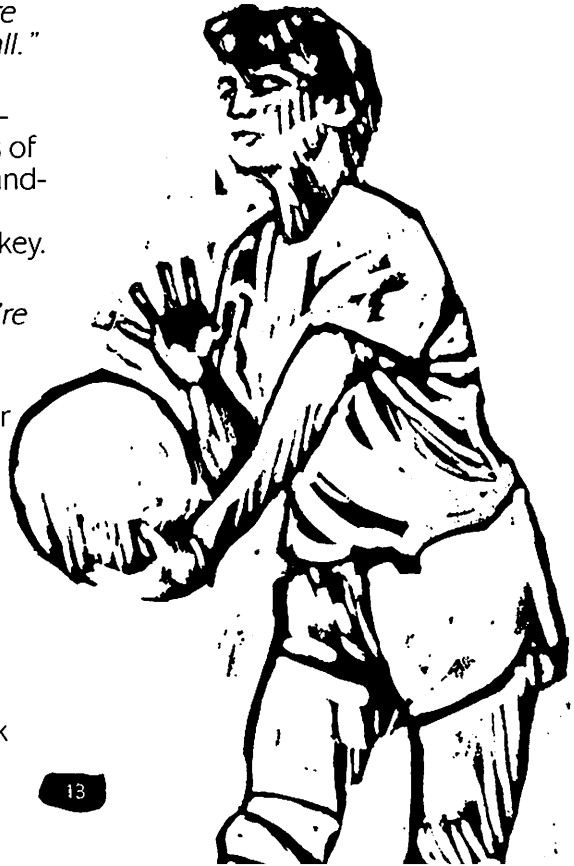
Children have many differences that affect their ability to learn and to play sports. Different learning rates, physical and psychological maturation levels, past experiences, family pressures, and interest all play a part. Knowing your players as individuals will help you learn the best way to work with each of them.

## COACHING YOUR OWN CHILD

60% of you coach your own child, which is not always the easiest task. Parent-coaches usually handle their own children in one of two ways.

Sometimes they are easier on their own children, giving them more privileges than teammates. But all too frequently, coaches expect more and demand more of their own children, who become resentful and stressed out.

If you are coaching your own child, have someone



observe you as you work with the team, to give you feedback on how fairly you are treating your child. It isn't always easy to receive this type of feedback, but it can be helpful, because research shows most coaches aren't very aware of their own coaching behaviors. In fact, in these studies, players saw their coaches more accurately than the coaches saw themselves.

While you're at it, have your observer check out how often you encourage and reward the rest of your team, too.

### **A NOTE ABOUT PARENTS**

Parents play a big part in their children's sports experience. Many have genuine concern and interest, but it's no secret that some parents put too much pressure on their children, behave inappropriately at games, and in general cause headaches for coaches.

What can you, as a coach, do about these "problem" parents? Before the season begins, share your philosophy and program goals with them. Describe the Positive Approach, why it works, and how it helps young athletes. Ask them to help reinforce and support

what you are trying to do with your team. You can do this by holding a brief meeting for parents. Though you won't be totally successful in getting through to everyone, some understanding of the sports psychology of young athletes will be helpful to parents in dealing with their own children in sports.

Secondly, model the appropriate behavior for parents. When you show respect for officials, encourage athletes instead of yelling at them for mistakes, and stress skill improvement, maximum effort, and striving to win, you will teach others to do the same.



The following "Bill of Rights for Young Athletes" was developed in 1979 by youth sports experts. Keeping these rights in mind will help you to maximize the benefits of youth sports for your players.



# BILL of RIGHTS

## FOR YOUNG ATHLETES

Right to participate in sports

Right to participate at a level commensurate with each child's maturity and ability

Right to have qualified adult leadership

Right to play as a child and not as an adult

Right of children to share in the leadership and decision-making of their sport participation

Right to participate in safe and healthy environments

Right to proper preparation for participation in sports

Right to an equal opportunity to strive for success

Right to be treated with dignity

Right to have fun in sports

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### "HEY, COACH!"

"Hey, Coach!" When you hear these words on the street and turn around, you may see a player you coached years ago. Your players will not only remember you as "Coach" for years, they will also benefit for years from what you taught them. As a youth coach, you do much more than teach your athletes to make a left-handed lay-up or to field a line drive. You have great influence over their

personal development. The self-esteem, self-confidence, independence, persistence, and other qualities you help them develop through their sports participation are strengths they take with them into the future. By using the Positive Approach to coaching, by teaching them that success is striving to win, putting out maximum effort, and improving skills, you are making them winners today — and tomorrow.

## WISCONSIN COMMITTEE FOR PREVENTION OF CHILD ABUSE

The Wisconsin Committee for Prevention of Child Abuse is a private, nonprofit organization committed to preventing physical, emotional and sexual abuse of children. We are the Wisconsin chapter of the National Committee for Prevention of Child Abuse, the chartered state office of Parents Anonymous, and a member agency of Community Shares of Wisconsin. Annual membership is \$15 for individuals, \$25 for organizations. Please join us. We need you.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Positive Approach coaching techniques which we adapted for use in this booklet were developed by Ronald E. Smith and Frank Smoll of the University of Washington as part of a coach effectiveness training program.

The techniques, the Wooden and Lombardi quotes, and the "Bill of Rights for Young Athletes" are reprinted from the *Handbook for Youth Sports Coaches* by permission of the American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance, 1900 Association Drive, Reston, VA, 22091.

The Institute for Study of Youth Sports, Michigan State University granted permission to reprint the techniques from their publication, *Improving Relationship Skills in Youth Sports Coaches*, as did Nathan J. Smith, M.D., editor of *Kidsports*.

The American Coaching Effectiveness Program, Human Kinetics Publishers, granted permission to reprint their philosophy, "Athletes first, winning second".

We are grateful to the authors and the publishers for allowing this material to be used in *Hey Coach!*.

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## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR COACHES, PARENTS, AND SPORTS PROGRAMS

*Sport Psychology for Youth Coaches: Personal Growth to Athletic Excellence* by Frank Smoll and Ronald Smith. Available from:

National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry  
3900-A Harewood Road NE, Washington, D.C. 20017 (202) 636-3825

*For catalogs of coaching publications and coach certification programs, call or write:*

AAHPERD (American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance), 1900 Association Drive, Reston, VA 22091 (703) 476-3481 or (703) 476-3491

Youth Sports Institute, YSI Publications, Room 210, IM Sports Circle, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI 48824

ACEP (The American Coaching Effectiveness Program), Human Kinetics Publishers, 1-800-747-4457

National Youth Sports Coaches Association, 2611 Old Okeechobee Rd., West Palm Beach, FL 33409 (407) 684-1141

*In Wisconsin contact:*

Wisconsin Park and Recreation Association, 7000 Greenway, Suite 201, Greendale, WI 53129 (414) 423-1210

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