



Working With Less Skilled Athletes In A Competitive Environment

This resource stems from a question submitted to the Ask PCA blog. Responses come from our experts including PCA Trainers, who lead live group workshops for coaches, parents, administrators and student-athletes.

"While I believe the parents goal of using baseball to teach this player the life lessons that sports can provide is commendable, I'm not sure putting him in what is self described as an environment of "playing to win" is fair to him (or the other players who clearly putting for the expected effort). Any advice is appreciated, as some coaches and parents have indicated concern that may cause some players and coaches not to return next year."

PCA Response by Joe Terrasi, PCA Lead Trainer

As a former special needs department director at a school, this question is near to my heart. Thank you for asking it.

There are a few separate components to this question, but the first I would like to address is what you described as "learning disabilities." This is not necessarily a direct cause of his difficulty being motivated or putting forth great effort, but how it is handled can potentially have great positive or negative impact. The answer to this part of the question can be summed up in one word: collaborate. For children with different learning or behavioral needs, the best service we can provide is to work closely with their parents and education professionals (the child's support team at school) to identify the needs, suggest possible positive interventions, monitor the success of those interventions, and adjust accordingly. Understand that the behavioral or motivational tools that succeed with other athletes may be ineffective with this athlete and cause him (and you!) a great deal of frustration.

Just a note: As we all move into our future as coaches, we owe it to ourselves and to our athletes to be more educated about differentiating our approaches with different athletes. An increasing number of our youth athletes have individualized education plans (IEP's) or 504 plans (accommodations for learning differences) at school. Learning to work with these athletes successfully is important to the coach and the athlete.

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Less Skilled, continued



Beyond the aspects of the athlete's needs, you still have multiple thorny issues at work. The first I'll address is the child's father and your team politics. What I'm inferring from your explanation is that this athlete would not have made the team if his father were not the president of the club. If this is the case, you need to address problems in your club's governance. If tryouts are necessary and any athlete makes a team without one, the club policies and procedures should be examined and fixed.

Regarding the athlete being difficult to motivate and being in a seemingly downward spiral: I am blessed to work with thousands of coaches each year, and I assure you this is a very, very common challenge at all levels. From what I can gather from your explanation, the boy is less experienced or skillful than his teammates, but is still measuring his success by the same standards. I can image how that would be frustrating for everyone involved and how it could be incredibly de-motivating for the athlete. Rather than "not measuring his success by hits," I would suggest measuring all your players by a wider range of traditional and non-traditional metrics. One of the most important groups of measurement can be what we call "hustle skills." We define these as "skills that any player can accomplish without regard to ability." Some simple examples: sprinting to your position when you take the field, getting down and ready to field during your pitcher's windup, etc. These let you celebrate the success and growth of all your players (including the least skillful) as well as letting you hold your most skillful player accountable.

In regard to "measuring hits:" Measuring anything that is currently unattainable is demotivating and produces anxiety. The answer though is not to stop measuring it, but to start measuring an attainable goal that will eventually lead to the larger goal. "I want at least two clean cuts during every at bat - I'm going to call that a 'hit-quality trip to the plate' and keep a percentage."

Finally, in regard to players or families quitting or threatening to quit if a player remains on the team: One of the most powerful skills our kids learn through sport is how to deal with, support, and even uplift our most difficult teammates. One of our core responsibilities as coaches is to teach and model this. Who among our adult friends has not had a challenging coworker? If parents allow their kids to leave for this reason, I feel bad for their kids for having missed this learning opportunity.

Thank you for your commitment to youth sports!

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