

Soccer team full of kicks for long-suffering coach

By Bill Glavin
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This is my third season coaching youngsters on Fair Lawn's recreational soccer team. I inherited the job at age 22, because the head coach had to quit. When the sheriff leaves town, the deputy takes over, said the head of the recreation department.

The first thing I learned in the job was that bar mitzvahs, parents, vandalism, and bad weather may be as important to the team's success as whether the little guys can kick the ball properly.

Sure enough, with the new season barely under way, our Woody Allen look-alike goalie with the squeaky voice announced at practice that his parents decided his bar mitzvah was more important than a soccer game. Worse yet, one quarter of the team was scheduled to sit on the dais at the reception.

"I can't help it, coach," he squeaked defensively. "My mother booked the caterer already."

"Don't even consider talking them out of attending the service," said a friend, sensing my panic. "Once their mothers take them for suits, it's a lost cause."

Started with 19 players

We had started with 19 players in a sport that needs a minimum of 11 per game. Three games into the season, I began to wonder whether there would be enough left to field a team.

Our most important player on defense came up with a broken thumb. Originally, it was rumored that a

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girl stepped on his hand during recess at school, but he staunchly denied that girls were in any way involved.

Another player came down with water on both knees. And at one point, I even considered a séance with the flu bug to beg his forgiveness. The flu bug probably respects Rodney Dangerfield more than soccer coaches.

Then there were those pitfalls which TV broadcasters regularly refer to as "mental mistakes."

"Can you believe it, coach?," said one player casually. "My mother's making me miss the next few games because I got two failing notices from school. Don't worry, my older sister says she'll sign the other two notices, so I should be able to smooth things over soon."

The following week, the father of one of our best athletes approached me. "I caught the boy drinking, and I have to punish him with sports, because that's all he knows," he said.

Needs more activities like soccer

I suggested it might help if the boy had more activities like the team to keep him busy. He didn't seem like the flexible type, however.

Even when the coach finds he can field a team, he learns to live and die by weather forecasts.

One week, when a game was rained out, I had to call each household to tell the players that the game was rescheduled for another Saturday afternoon. Sure enough, the team we were supposed to play decided the

following day to reschedule the game for the morning.

Back to the phones. More often than not, Joey's high-school-age sister is tying up the line for two hours. But getting through is only half the battle. Once the phone rings, the exchange usually goes something like:

"Hello, this is Joey's soccer coach again, is Joey home?"

Next comes the awesome scream: "Jooeeey, it's for you."

But even then, you may be in for a surprise: "Hello this is Joe, what can I do for you,?" says a deep voice.

"Sorry," I say. "I meant Joe Jr."

Finally, Joey. I attempt to inject some humor into the situation: "Hi Joey Jr., this is the president of the Cosmos. Want to sign with us for \$1 million?"

"No thanks, another team offered me \$10 million," comes the crisp reply. "Whaddaya want, coach? 'The White Shadow' is on."

Interesting listening

Sometimes the most interesting aspect of coaching is simply listening.

You're always guaranteed an earful.

One player insists he should be in line for a front-office job and another demands we retire his number after the season. One of the chubby fullbacks said that he'd learned in school that running was bad for the back. Last year's team asked to bring their girlfriends on the bus and yelled "Miller Time" after every other lap.

Then there are the parents. Sometimes they are remarkably helpful when we really need them. After vandals tore down one of our goal posts, two fathers quickly pulled tool kits out of their cars and worked for a good half-hour to assure that we wouldn't have to forfeit the game. And the coach is surely grateful when the autumn wind numbs the face and a generous parent offers a cup of hot chocolate.

But there's also the throng of parents who think their offspring are the second coming of Pele. They stand on the sidelines, yell at the referees, stuff their children with bagels during the game, attend practice, and almost always put unnecessary pressure on the youngsters.

And sometimes the coach may feel like a ghost when he walks by a onetime friendly player or parent who doesn't seem to recognize him.

'Out of sight ...'

As one graying father, who volunteered his time as a baseball coach for years until he became disgusted, said: "With a lot of these people, it's out of sight, out of mind."

One parent candidly told me: "Once we get to know you, we probably won't like you. That's the way it always is. But don't take it personally. I'm sure they'll pass around a collection envelope for the coaches at the end."

As we head for the playoffs, my fingers are crossed. One more rain-out could mean another scheduling conflict with a bar mitzvah. And that would be disastrous.

One player coolly suggested that perhaps an understanding parent might even decide I'm an integral part of her child's growing experience and decide to invite the coach to her son's bar mitzvah.

"Hey, coach, did you know that the reception usually includes an open bar?," asked the player.

"Yes Michael, I know," I said.

"If I don't catch the flu, I just may go."