



Parents Intervening When Coaches Act Inappropriately In Front Of Their Kids

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.

“Any advice for a disgruntled parent with little league? Last week during our son’s game the coach of the other team was trying to break the rules... his son’s pitch count was 41 and he tried to put him in as catcher the next inning. My husband and coach tried explaining the rule to the other coach stating that his son couldn’t catch due to his pitch count. He then said to him “I should’ve known you’d be a dick about this” “I would expect nothing less from you” in front of a dugout full of 9- and 10-year-old boys who all heard him and then proceeded to ask our son if they heard Max’s dad call your dad a dick. Our little league board (which my husband is a member of) all agreed a minimum 2 game suspension. The president of the board (who coaches a travel team with this guy) let everybody know that he handled it by giving him a warning. This is not ok...in my opinion. Any thoughts on how this should be handled?”

PCA Response by PCA Lead Trainer, Joe Terrasi

Thank you for sharing such a challenging situation. If I were in your shoes, I would be disgruntled as well. You may think I’m saying this for effect, but the following is true: Sometimes while I work, I put a movie on TV that I’ve already seen; I like the background noise. When I first read your question, the movie that was on in the background was “42,” the excellent rendition of the story of Jackie Robinson. It’s a story of Robinson’s courage, obviously, but also one of the courage it takes for both leaders and joiners to change a culture.

There are two separate topics in your question that each merit their own discussion. The incident itself – and how it’s been handled by the players and coaches – is its own topic. The other matter worth addressing is the culture and governance of your league.

When we discuss the principle of “honoring the game” at PCA workshops, we examine the merits of respecting the ROOTS of sport – the **R**ules, **O**pponents, **O**fficials, our **T**eammates, and our **S**elf. Certainly the basis of a pitch count rule is rooted in both equity and player safety. Dishonoring the rules indicates a lack of understanding or regard for these underlying values. It also goes without saying that the opposing coach did not respect his opponents.

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But of the ROOTS we work to respect, the hardest is “self.” It’s easy to talk about respect and sportsmanship in a classroom or at practice, but respecting ourselves and what we believe when faced with a real-life incident is tremendously difficult. I’m sure it was not easy for your husband to handle the affront with dignity. Attaching a morally courageous action to a theoretical value may be the most important deed we perform as coaches. Your husband did your son and his teammates a remarkable service by modeling this most challenging of behaviors.

As a coach and teacher, the next useful step for your husband (or one of the other coaches) would be to narrate that modeling. It’s important to talk to the players about how and why we respect the elements of ROOTS and how hard it is to live up to that standard in real life. It’s also crucial that the players learn to identify situations where they too can live up to high standards – even when it’s difficult or unpopular.

Working with your league is a separate matter. From your telling of the story, it seems there might be some cultural dissonance at play. If the board “all agreed” on a matter, and the president chose a different action, there may also be some question about how clear your rules of governance are.

Regarding culture, are there clear standards in your organizational mission that are articulated through repeated words and actions? What we find consistently is that a league culture that is not aggressively and constantly tended quickly leans toward a “win-at-all-cost” mentality. Your case is a great example: if a coach ignores pitch count or playing time rules, he is willing to win at the cost of his players’ well-being.

As to governance, it is worth examining the board’s rules and understandings about the process by which decisions are made. If the process is not clearly articulated, it will be easy to wind up in difficult situations – especially when the league’s cultural identity is at stake. If the ultimate actions of the board work against the cultural grain of the league, league leaders will need to assess both the strength of the culture and the processes by which it is to be upheld.

At the risk of sounding contrary, what a **great** moment for your son and his teammates. They got to see what integrity and moral courage look like up close. Moreover, they got to do so in a way that they can understand and practice themselves. While the incident is unfortunate and infuriating, handling it the right way is a great gift to youth athletes. In the movie still playing in the background as I write, I’m struck by the importance of not just the courageous person, but the collective courage it can inspire.

Thank you for your question and for your commitment to youth sports.

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