

NEW GENERATION, SAME OLD MISTAKES



I remember the day my son signed up my grandson, James, for Little League®. I was so excited. I brought out an old photo album, and showed James the pictures of his dad at practice and games. My wife took most of the photos back then because I was busy on the field helping to coach. I was a very hands-on father. Too much so my wife told me over the years when my son played. She made me promise to take more of a backseat with my grandson. I kept my promise ... for a while.

Me and my son, Richard, would watch practices from behind the center field fence. I encouraged Richard to help out on the field. He seemed satisfied just watching, and working with James in the backyard. At first, I thought it was because the team had plenty of coaches, now I know that I was the one who turned him away from coaching.

One day, Richard couldn't make it to practice, so I volunteered to take James home. Instead of hanging out at the center field fence, I stood by the dugout. I introduced myself to the manager, and seeing the normal crew of coaches was absent, I offered to help out. He gladly accepted.

When the team was playing a fun game of "Knock Out," I saw that many of the players were fielding the ground balls wrong. So, I stepped in, taught them to get their backside down, and use the alligator hand to secure the ball into the glove. That little bit of instruction was the beginning of me resorting to the ways of decades earlier.

From that moment, I filled out my volunteer application, got my background check, and was on the field at every practice, taking over from time to time, working hard with the kids on their skills, and teaching the importance of discipline. And, just like I was with Richard, I was particularly focused on James. I would point out what he could do better, and how to do it. When I saw him laughing with his teammates, I told him to concentrate on the drill. If I felt he didn't hustle enough, I called him out. In truth, I called out all the kids if I felt they weren't doing enough.

At games, I sat in the stands with my family, and would bark instructions, reminding James and his teammates about what we worked on in practice. I even found my way into the team huddle after games.

My wife reminded me of my promise. I told her the team needed a more experienced coach, and they benefited from my instruction. Skill-wise that was probably true, but I definitely upset the chemistry of the fun bunch the manager had put together. And, James seemed to have lost his spunk.

The day before a game, the manager told me that I wasn't needed on the field for practice. I asked if he wanted me to pitch in the cage. He told me that wasn't necessary. On gameday, when James missed a routine ground ball, I yelled, "James! Alligator hand! Come on!" James lowered his hat on his forehead to hide his tears.

My son tugged me on the arm, and motioned for me to follow him. Behind the concession stand, he said, "You need to stop. You did this to me, and I hated it. You're not going to do this to James!" I told him I was only trying to help. "No one asked you to help." I took a step back, and said, "Don't you think the team is better because of what I teach them?"

"Honestly," said Richard. "No. I don't. They were having fun before. Now, they're not."

He walked back to the bleachers, and I went to the center field fence. After the game, I didn't go into the team huddle, and I decided I would only help out at practice if asked. I went to every game, but I watched them from a distance. I didn't say a word or bark any instruction. I knew it was hard for my son to say that to me, and it was just as hard to hear it. I sucked up my pride, though, and apologized. I was trying to help, but it turns out, I was just hurting.

The team started playing looser, won a few games, and were definitely having fun again. Most important to me, James got his spunk back. I was too hands-on and tough as a father on the baseball field. I wasn't going to continue to make the same mistake as a grandfather. Now, I'm cheering from the stands, and letting the next generation coach from the sidelines.