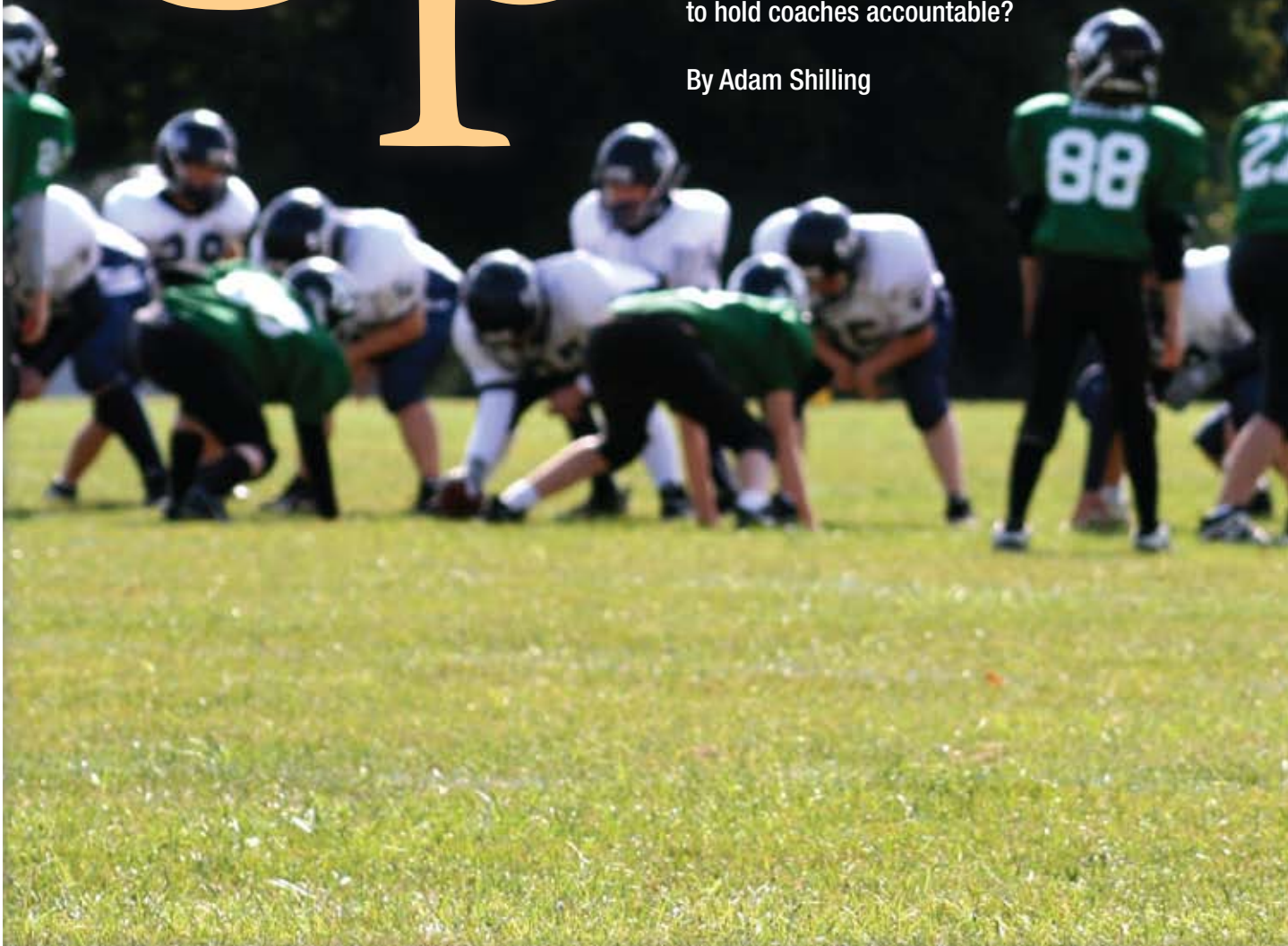


Stepping Up

These days an ever-growing number of recreation directors around the country are doing more than simply training the volunteer coaches in their programs – they're taking proactive measures to observe and evaluate their behaviors throughout the season to ensure the best possible experiences for their young athletes. Are you part of this important national movement to hold coaches accountable?

By Adam Shilling





FOR Randy Little, training and educating his youth

sports coaches is just the first step in ensuring that the children in his sports league enjoy a positive, safe and rewarding experience.

Once the season begins and teams take the field for that first practice, his job as a youth sports administrator is only just beginning.

“Personally, I make it a habit to visit practices and engage in friendly chat with assistants and parents, as well as observing the interaction of coaches and players,” said Little, president of the Ozarks Football League, Inc. in Missouri. “I also make it a habit to watch the games and monitor sideline behavior, as well as sit in the crowd and listen. I also have an excellent relationship with the head of referees and get feedback after every game from officials.”

Little, like a growing number of individuals overseeing youth sports programs around the country, is well aware of the increasing importance of holding coaches accountable for their actions – whether it is at a mid-week practice in front of a handful of parents or during a weekend game with a bleacher packed with spectators.

These days, training coaches and then turning them over to a group of kids is simply no longer enough.

Now it’s all about accountability.

Keeping tabs

Training volunteer coaches before the season begins is important for setting a strong foundation on what working with children is all about, but as many administrators around the country have realized, it is just one part of the equation.

“To be sure coaches are doing as they have been trained, you have to show your face,” said Stephen Rawls, athletics coordinator for the Ocean Springs Parks Commission (Miss.). “Coaches and parents want to know that you as the athletics administrator are not just doing the office work, but you are involved. When you show your face, you show a higher level of dedication to your athletics program and coaches will respect that, and in turn respect the NYSCA training.”

Little agrees, as he keeps close tabs on what happens on the field to ensure that his coaches are behaving responsibly and meeting the kids’ needs. He’s also making sure that they are living up to the National Youth Sports Coaches Association (NYSCA) Code of Ethics pledge, which they all signed and agreed to adhere to at the beginning of the season.

For the most part coaches do a great job upholding the principles of NYSCA, the 28-year-old membership and education organization provided by the non-profit National Alliance for Youth Sports (NAYS).

But every now and then coaches can stray from proper behavior and lose perspective, whether it’s while teaching a skill during practice or – the much more likely scenario – allowing their emotions to get the best of them during a game that isn’t working out quite like they had hoped.

Earlier this year Little was forced to relieve a volunteer youth sports coach from his duties and ban him from contact with players due to what the league determined was unacceptable behavior. According to Little, the coach ignored several warnings about unsportsmanlike conduct, such as arguing at length with officials, screaming at players and running up the score during some games.

“We gave repeated warnings and at least two written reprimands

indicating his continued behavior was unacceptable,” Little said. “In this case, it was not difficult. His defiance eased the process. We gave him every opportunity to redeem himself and he chose not to.”

In the case of this particular coach, a proactive training seminar and a Code of Ethics pledge was simply not enough to get him on board with the Ozarks Football League’s (OFL) philosophy of emphasizing positive sportsmanship.

The OFL benefited from having an experienced and dedicated recreation professional in Little to help deal with the issue, and Little had the backing of a nationally recognized coaching organization that provided him with a straightforward process for evaluating and ensuring accountability among his coaches, as well as a process for revoking an NYSCA membership if coaches cross the line.

“Any training, unless practiced, is not worth much,” Little said. “The individual must be willing to abide by the very essence of what NYSCA teaches. That individual must also agree to the same philosophy as the organization of which he or she is a volunteer.”

Unfortunately, the situation Little encountered is a familiar one: A volunteer youth sports coach attends a training seminar and signs a behavioral code of ethics at the beginning of the season, but once the scoreboard is turned on and the game begins transforms into the youth sports version of Bobby Knight – and the players suffer.

Many leagues are finding out the hard way that simply telling coaches what is expected of them and then crossing their fingers and hoping for the best is a proven recipe for trouble.

Recreation departments and youth sports organizations have a responsibility to make sure that their coaches are adhering to a standard of behavior and are accountable for their actions well after the training program concludes.

Stepping up to stronger programs

NAYS urges all of its chapters to follow what it refers to as the “Four-Step Process.” This encompasses



Relying on parent evaluations is just one way to monitor coaches throughout the season.

background screening, training, evaluation and accountability. Adherence to all these steps is the safest and most effective way for a league to ensure that their young athletes are in the hands of qualified and caring individuals. Once coaches have passed background checks and completed training, it is incumbent upon administrators to constantly evaluate them – and for coaches to care about evaluating themselves and the job they are doing.

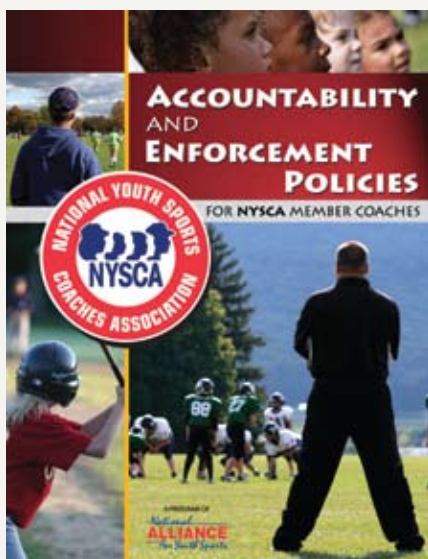
A pioneer in proactive training and education for adults in youth sports, NAYS recognizes the need for administrators like Rawls and Little to be able to monitor and evaluate their coaches throughout the season, well after they have left the training classroom. However, with multiple practices and games going on simultaneously all week long, it is a challenge for administrators to ensure that coaches are adhering to the NYSCA Code of Ethics at all times.

“The NYSCA training clinics are just that, training clinics,” Rawls said. “Once they leave that room, it is up to the administrator to be sure the coaches implement NYSCA coaching standards. NAYS is very helpful with improving the quality of our leagues and coaches, but we have to be the eyes and ears to enforce what we learn from them.”

To help provide administrators with those extra eyes and ears, NAYS introduced a new online feature earlier this year that enables its members to do just that with just a few clicks of a mouse. NAYS Chapter Directors and Clinicians can now view anonymous parent evaluations of coaches directly on the NAYS Chapter Management site via the NYSCA Coach Rating System. The system provides league administrators instant online feedback about how their coaches are doing directly from the parents that see them every day. (See the sidebar *How do you rate?*)

“Getting volunteer coaches trained and NYSCA certified is certainly not where it stops,” said Love Ishie, rural youth athletics coordinator for Charleston County Parks and Recreation (S.C.). “Coaching behavior can easily decline without extra monitoring on our part as league administrators. Some coaches attend the training merely to get certified, without making an effort to incorporate

Administrators need to emphasize to coaches at the beginning of the season to not be timid when it comes to blowing the whistle on bad behavior.



what they learned. Our extra efforts include having them sign a code of ethics pledge, continually monitoring games and having parents and athletes formally evaluate the coach's performance. The Coach Rating System on the NAYS Web site is a great tool.”

If a parent feels a coach is behaving improperly, or that a violation of the Code of Ethics has occurred, they can feel confident knowing that their grievance will be heard in a confidential and professional manner.

The system is extremely valuable for providing feedback to coaches looking to understand what areas they are strong in and what, if any, areas they should focus on improving, as well. It is also useful for administrators in identifying problem coaches.

“I have tried to get feedback in the past, but it is always a challenge to get parents to fill out the form,” said Joe Stanczyk, assistant youth sports director for Pearl Harbor Youth Sports. “Most of the feedback I get is in the form of a complaint via phone or email. After seeing the 14 questions on the Coach Rating System and the ease at which one can respond, I was sold that this is something I need our coaches to start doing.”

Earlier this year Pearl Harbor Youth Sports (Hawaii), the youth sports organization of the Pearl Harbor Naval Base, stepped up its efforts to ensure that its coaches are providing the best experiences possible for the children under their care by mandating use of the new coach evaluation system.

“It was a no brainer,” Stanczyk said. “I just looked at the ease of the evaluation and the time involved.”

Putting the brakes on bad behavior

Relying on parent evaluations is just one way to monitor coaches throughout the season. Coaches themselves must understand that it is their responsibility to report any inappropriate behavior they may witness and should never be reluctant to come forward.

“We expect, and have instructed all coaches during meetings to report any inappropriate behavior they witness to the league administrator,” Ishie said. “It is the duty and responsibility of any coach to report another coach if he or she witnesses any inappropriate behavior.”

Administrators need to emphasize to coaches at the beginning of the season to not be timid when it comes to blowing the whistle on bad behavior. Making sure coaches are held accountable for their behavior should be considered a league-wide effort between parents, coaches, administrators and officials alike.

"I think you bear a new responsibility once becoming NYSCA certified and holding other coaches accountable falls under that," Rawls said. "If a coach witnessed another coach acting unruly around his team I would expect and encourage him to report that behavior. It's not a matter of being a snitch, it's a matter of protecting the kids in our league and making our athletics program an enjoyable experience for everyone."

Two new additions to the NAYS Web site (www.nays.org) are in place for parents to lodge a coach complaint. There is also a new section on a chapter's Chapter Management page that lists procedures for filing decisions that were made on the chapter level so that they can be stored in the coach's records, no matter how insignificant they may seem.

"The bottom line is that a single incident of a coach yelling at an official or getting into a verbal altercation with another coach can certainly be handled by the chapter without a revocation of membership," Engh said. "But a pattern of behavior over the course of different seasons, and even different sports with different administrators overseeing each, would be very significant



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— Stephen Rawls, athletics coordinator for Ocean Springs (Miss.) Parks Commission

For years, NAYS has had an accountability procedure in place for its membership. However, in the past NAYS only got involved in situations that were so severe that they warranted revocation of membership. Now, through its new *Accountability and Enforcement Policies for NYSCA Member Coaches*, all NAYS chapters will be involved in helping to oversee coaching behavior in a more comprehensive way.

"We've had members who have had issues with a league that results in a suspension from that particular league, but often the incident may have been serious, but not enough for the league to pursue permanent revocation of membership," said John Engh, chief operating officer of NAYS. "So many times what happens is that coach will just remove his child and sign up for that same sport in another community that isn't overseen by that NAYS chapter. At the very least we feel that the new league should be given the information on the incident that warranted suspension so that they can make their own decision to accept this person as a coach or not."

information for a program to be aware of when deciding who should be coaching their children."

Revoking memberships

While the majority of today's volunteer coaches do a wonderful job of handling their responsibilities and provide richly rewarding experiences for their players, the reality is that many administrators at some point will more than likely deal with a Code of Ethics infraction. In the event that a coach does violate the NYSCA Code of Ethics, NYSCA provides a swift plan of disciplinary action that can result in revocation of membership, consequently disqualifying a volunteer from performing coaching duties.

"The revocation procedure is a straight forward process," Ishie said. "It is always difficult to have to confront and terminate an otherwise amiable person who expresses a desire to volunteer, but it is not difficult to make the decision to terminate a coach when it is the result of circumstances that are specifically addressed in our policy manual."

Earlier this year Rawls was forced to revoke a coach's NYSCA membership because of a dispute over the coach's son's age. After learning that the coach's son was assigned to the wrong age division, Rawls politely asked him to step down as coach of that team and offered him a position as an assistant coach for his son's new team.

"It was a very minor problem but he took it very personally and began to attack our director's job," Rawls said. "He pulled his son out of our athletics program and threatened to pull him out of our after-school program even though we tried to explain to him that he wasn't punishing us by doing that, he was punishing his son."

League officials agreed that this behavior was unacceptable and constituted grounds for NYSCA membership revocation. Having never dealt with this situation before, Rawls contacted NAYS headquarters for assistance on how to proceed to revoke the coach's membership. Because the incident

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– Love Ishie, rural youth athletics coordinator for Charleston County Parks and recreation (S.C.)

occurred so early in the season, NYSCA even reimbursed the league for the coach's membership dues. The process was done discreetly and professionally, and this issue ultimately blew over in the community.

"Once a coach's NYSCA membership is revoked, our league administrator handles all matters privately with the coach involved," Ishie said. "All coaches are aware of what could happen to their NYSCA membership if they violate our league standards. When a coach's status is revoked, we do not publicize the coach's removal, nor do we solicit reactions from parents and coaches, or the community. If questions are asked we simply refer individuals to the policies and standards governing our program."

In the end, meeting the standards of the program is what it all comes down to. Training volunteers before the season begins – and holding them accountable for their actions throughout – is a major step in the right direction to meeting the needs of the young athletes. **sk**

How do you rate?

Volunteer coaches typically go through their seasons without ever really knowing how well they are performing their jobs.

That's no longer the case, thanks to the unveiling of the Coach Rating System by the National Alliance for Youth Sports earlier this year.

While the system allows administrators to track how each coach is fulfilling his or her responsibilities, one of the most attractive features is that it also provides the coaches themselves with a chance to receive honest feedback from parents – all done anonymously.

The evaluation system consists of 14 questions that gauge how well a volunteer coach performs his or her role in the eyes of parents, administrators and officials.

The system can be helpful even for those outstanding coaches that the kids love playing for and learning from, since they can use the system as a springboard

to take their skills to an even higher level – and forge even stronger connections with their players.

For example, a coach may review his evaluation and find that he received high marks in every category except one, so



armed with that information he can focus on improving his skills in that particular area to become a more well-rounded coach.

Additionally, for those coaches who receive high marks in each category that is equally

valuable information, as it serves as positive reinforcement that how they are handling their responsibilities is right on track.

"The rating system is a great idea as a way to provide some feedback," said Mark Perkins, program coordinator for Oconee County Parks & Recreation (Ga.).

The system allows league administrators and coaches who are affiliated with NAYS to provide a digital link for parents to evaluate coaches anonymously. The link can either be placed within an email or posted directly on a league or organization's Web site.

The questions hit all the key coaching areas, such as safety, sportsmanship and how well they teach skills, among others. Coaches can log on and see how parents rated them. While the parents' answers are confidential, coaches can see their average scores in each category.

Visit www.nays.org to learn more.