Youth sports programs have been altered forever by child predators using their coaching positions to commit unspeakable crimes against children. With the increased scrutiny by parents these days at their children’s practices and games comes new challenges for the millions of coaches who volunteer for all the right reasons.

By Greg Bach
Editor’s note: This is the third in a year-long series examining child abuse in youth sports.

The youth sports landscape today’s volunteer coaches navigate is dramatically different than what existed even a few short years ago.

It’s one that has been ravaged – and forever altered – by those who have used their coaching positions to manipulate, traumatize and destroy young lives through horrific and chilling sexual abuse.

It’s the youth baseball coach in New Hampshire, arrested in June of this year for allegedly sexually abusing four boys – and videotaping the monstrous acts; it’s the 47-year-old Oregon man who has served as president of the local Little League and coached baseball, softball, basketball and football, who was arrested in August on eight counts of sexual abuse on a teen-age girl he coached, and police believe there are more victims to come forward; it’s the long-time youth soccer coach in California who was charged in mid-August with two felony counts of continuous sexual abuse against a child and two counts of molesting a child; it’s the cheerleading and tumbling coach in Virginia who was convicted on 11 counts of sex crimes against five victims, all ages 11 or younger at the time of the attacks; and it’s the 49-year-old former volunteer baseball coach in Texas who was handed a 10-year prison sentence following a conviction on four counts of indecency with a child.

These frightening cases from just the past 90 days, along with countless others – both those making headlines and those going unreported year after year because of innocent children scared into silence – has made coaching youth sports these days more challenging and parents of young athletes understandably more wary of who is coaching their children.

“Knowing there are weirdoes in the world has made it hard on all coaches,” says Phil Billigmeier, an NYSCA baseball coach in Yukon, Okla.

NEW TERRITORY
So as parents begin taking closer looks at what is going on at practices, coaches are forced to reevaluate their approaches, perhaps fearful that close contact during a mid-week practice may cross the line in some parents’ eyes and cause alarm, discomfort or lead the parent into thinking that he or she is harboring the most heinous ulterior motives.

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“Anecdotally we have heard a lot of coaches worry about this,” says Dr. Kristen Dieffenbach, an assistant professor of athletic coaching education at West Virginia University. “The ones who worry about the image of impropriety are the ones who are trying to do what is right.”

So what is the right approach? What does this all mean for the dad who steps forward to coach his son’s T-ball team for the first time? Or even the long-time basketball coach entrenched in the community who has worked with hundreds of kids and now even coaches those former players’ kids?

Do coaching techniques need to be readjusted or completely revamped? Do programs need to re-think their policies? How close is too close when it comes to teaching batting stances, correcting tackling techniques or adjusting footwork on jump shots?

“Close contact and physical touch is often necessary for instruction, supporting, spotting and safety,” says Cindy McElhinney, director of programs for Darkness to Light, which provides programming and resources for adults to prevent and recognize child sexual abuse. “The most important thing to remember here is that these types of interactions must take place with other adults present or in full view of others. They should be provided only when it’s in the best interest of the child. Coaches should also take cues from the child with respect to touch and always respect their needs.”

NYSCA coach Mike Welborn of the Fredericksburg (Va.) Parks & Recreation Department, has coached youth sports for more than 30 years, and his advice to coaches these days is to understand and accept that the atmosphere is different in communities around the country, but to not take the concerns of parents personally.

“My advice to coaches in regards to this is to understand the dangers in our society and to not take parents’ protective ways as a personal reflection on you,” says Welborn. “As a very experienced coach I still watch my grandchildren on the field. Also, make sure anyone you bring on board as an assistant is league approved and is someone that you know upholds the same standards as you do. The head coach has the responsibility of protecting all of the kids on his team.”

And the staffs of recreation programs must address this changing youth sports climate head on, too.
“The message directors should convey to coaches, athletes and parents is that rules for touching are important to honor the physical boundaries of others and to protect kids as well as the coaches,” McElhinney says. “It is possible to define appropriate touches within the context of a particular sport.”

She recommends beginning by defining the boundaries and making sure everyone understands why boundaries are important to personal safety.

“The most important things to remember is that touch is to be only for the benefit of the child and not the adult,” she explains. “Coaches can set a good example by asking the child before touching them, such as in the case of assisting with a batting stance or the treatment of an injury. Coaches should be aware of how individual children respond to touch and always respect their needs.”

WORKING TOGETHER

In this age of background checks and screening, it’s a popular misconception that that’s enough to protect children. But it’s not.

“Background checks help weed out some people that shouldn’t be coaches, but they can’t catch every-one,” Welborn says. “For that reason alone I believe that parents need to be present at all times when their child is at a field. I know that has a ‘don’t trust’ overtone toward coaches but the sad truth is that for the most part coaches are strangers to many of these families.”

Coaches can take control of their situations by communicating with the parents of their players, explaining to them before they ever take the field for the first practice of the season what they want to teach their children in the coming weeks or months and – equally important these days – exactly how they are going to go about doing so.

“I have a parents meeting at the beginning of the season to let them know my background,” Billigmeier says. “I give them an idea of what to expect from me and what I expect from the kids and them. I let them know that I treat all the kids like they were my own.”

Furthermore, coaches who demand parents attend every practice and game send a pretty strong message that they have volunteered for all the right reasons and want the child’s mom or dad there to observe every single second of the season. Coaches must also welcome questions from parents at any time – it’s simply the right way to conduct business these days when it comes to youth sports and protecting children.

“We need to make it safe for kids to talk,” says Dieffenbach. “We need to clarify that all adults have a moral and ethical responsibility to keep their eyes open, to watch others and to speak up in the face of questionable behavior.”

Adds Welborn, the veteran coach: “While the vast majority of youth coaches are honest adults, the responsibility of protecting children falls on each parent,” he says. “Trust your coaches to instruct your children, but be present when they do. Be aware of any contact that is suspect in nature. Some contact may be necessary, such as adjusting your child’s batting stance, for example. I hate to entice parents into a sense of not trusting, however that’s a necessity in the world we live in.”

And it’s a changed youth sports world that volunteer coaches must be able to adapt to for the benefit – and complete safety – of their players.