

Coaching in Blowout Games

By Neil Phillips



If you're a youth sports coach, you'll inevitably be involved in a blowout game. Blowout games are a big frustration for players, coaches, and parents. For the losing team, they can take the joy out of playing the game. For the winning team, they deny players the mental and physical challenges that closely contested games present. Generally speaking, blowout games lack the environmental energy that makes sports fun and exciting.

Blowout games are a significant source of negativity that often exists in youth sports. Coaches and parents who routinely endure them gradually lose a feeling of loyalty to the organization. Most importantly, the embarrassment and humiliation that blowout games often foster is a big reason why many kids quit sports at an early age. As a result, one of the most important responsibilities of youth sports organization leadership is to minimize the chances of blowout games. This can be done by giving clear and specific descriptions of the league ability and experience levels, and by creating a fair and organized player draft system. The ideal scenario is a league in which every team has a realistic chance to win every game and every team needs to try their hardest to avoid losing.

Let's face it, despite the best organizational efforts to create well-balanced teams and schedules, blowouts are going to happen. Even when well-matched teams meet, one plays extraordinarily well, while the other struggles; star players have piano recitals; or the ball just takes funny bounces. That's the nature of youth sports. We need to be prepared for coaching in blowout games from both the losing and the winning ends. Here are some tools:

On the Losing – end

Accept reality – As coach, you must be the embodiment of confidence and optimism for your players to emulate. When your team gets behind, no matter how big the deficit, you must exude a belief that there is always a chance of a comeback. This ever-present glimmer of hope is one of the sacred and magical tenets of sports. However, at a certain point, it helps to acknowledge to yourself that you're team is not going to win the game. Accepting this allows you to seize creative opportunities to address the situation at hand, some of which, ironically, could lead to your team getting back in the game.

Re-adjust goals – Most often, the problem when losing in a blowout is that your team can't score. Find ways to set achievable goals for your team that don't involve scoring. Examples of this include getting the ball to a designated point on the field, completing a specified number of passes, or making good contact with the ball.

Redefine "Winner" – Tell your players that, no matter what the scoreboard says, they can be winners. Establish a standard for your players where they know they're being judged on their effort, improvement, and on how they respond to mistakes they make. They can be successful in these areas regardless of the score. Throughout the game, communicate specific examples of player effort, cite tangible measures of improvement, and point to positive responses to mistakes. During blowouts, players tend to feel alone and exposed, so be sure to include yourself in the team's plight by holding yourself to the same standards of mastery. Model the character traits you want your players to develop. If you keep coaching, it's more likely that they'll keep playing.

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Set "Character Goals" – There are only two ways to respond when you're getting blown out; you can quit or you can keep trying. Present these two options to your players and ask them what kind of people they want to be. Encourage them by telling them how much you admire people like them; people who keep trying even when things aren't going well.

Scramble player positions – Blowouts present a great opportunity for experimentation and creativity. Try putting players at positions they don't regularly play. This can help keep them interested and enthused about the game, and also gives you a chance to learn more about your players' skills.

Post-game conduct – After a blowout, the post-game handshakes can be awkward for both teams. Encourage your players to be proud of their effort. They should feel good about themselves and should stand tall and make eye contact when congratulating their opponents. Prepare your players for post-game conduct by having them rehearse this process at practice.

On the Winning – end

Accept reality – We've all seen amazing comebacks in every sport at every level. The fear that a team will miraculously close the gap drives many coaches to keep the pressure on beyond the point that's necessary to ensure victory. Yes, great comebacks do happen, but they're rare. In addition, a frantic comeback by an opponent presents a tremendous challenge for your players. How will they respond? What will they learn focus and concentration? Be sensitive to the effect the score is having on your opponents, your players, and on the quality of the game. Avoid humiliating your opponents either by "pouring it on" or by mocking them through overdone restraint.

Make adjustments at defensive "attack points" – In every sport, there is an "attack point" where the opponents offensive effort is initiated. Dominating this area defensively can stifle your opponents' offensive capability. Examples of defensive "attack points" include the pitcher in baseball and softball, guards in basketball, and forwards in soccer. Placing less capable players in these positions can help enable an opponent's offensive attack.

Scramble player positions – Putting players at positions they don't normally play accomplishes two things. First, it presents challenges to your players while they learn an unfamiliar position, and secondly, it can serve to reduce the dominance over your opponent.

Focus on player weaknesses – Challenge your team in ways that aren't related to the scoreboard. Ask your players to spend the remainder of the game focusing on improving their individual weaknesses. For instance, put them in positions where they're forced to perform with their weaker hands/legs. This way, they can strive for skill improvement where they're less likely to dominate the opponent.

Post-game conduct – Stress to your players the importance of respecting the opponent. They should treat the opponent with dignity by acknowledging their effort. Model this for your players as you greet the opposing coach and players. Once again, they'll handle this situation more comfortably if they've prepared for it during practice. Also, remember not to ignore the efforts that your team displayed. They should be complimented on their accomplishments, as well.