

ACADEMICALLY INELIGIBLE

For the better part of 25 years I served as a volunteer youth sports coach at the local YMCA, working with children ages 4 and 5 each fall and spring in the soccer program. My longest tenured player was a boy named Jeremy, who played for me a total of five seasons. I enjoyed my time being Jeremy's coach. By nature he was cooperative, friendly and, as one parent put it, was going to do "something" while on the playing field. Jeremy also improved steadily as a player and by his fourth season was enjoying success scoring goals regularly in games. So when in the middle of that season I was told by his parents that he was going to be held out of soccer due to significant misbehavior at school I was completely caught off guard. Regardless, as coach I supported the decision to put Jeremy on the "academically ineligible" list.

Jeremy was held out of practices and games for a week. From there his parents decided to let him play again but not without reservations on their part. The behavior issues, though improved a bit, had not been resolved completely. At that point I asked his parents if I could get involved in that I knew the principal at his school well and would be willing to talk to her. Jeremy's parents liked the suggestion and told me it was OK to move forward. So on the Monday following his most recent game I gave the principal a call.

During my conversation with the school principal I related to her my experience in working with Jeremy over four seasons. I noted that he had always been cooperative and fully engaged in a sport that was continuously moving and active. The principal now had a picture of Jeremy that was dramatically different from what was being reported to her at school. She indicated she would look further into things and from there asked me to give her a rundown of his last soccer game. Our conversation ended with the principal simply saying "leave the rest to me."

The principal took time with Jeremy one-on-one and gave him a rundown of his last game as I had described it to her. As I was told later "his eyes got real wide" when she congratulated him on the three goals he had scored in the game. After spending the time with Jeremy the principal determined that he would thrive in settings that were continually engaged and active, indicating to me "I know exactly what teacher he will do well with." Jeremy was now able to enjoy academic success as well as success on the soccer field. Even after my "fifth-year senior" had moved on from my team I learned years later that he had done well throughout his elementary school years.

One of the joys I have had over my nearly half-century of coaching youth sports has been the notes and kind words I have received from parents. At the end of Jeremy's last season I received a card from him and his parents. It reads as follows:

"Coach"-

We cannot tell you how much we have enjoyed these past five soccer seasons, or how much we appreciate the time and effort you spend on the kids. Jeremy has really grown over the past

couple of years, both on the soccer field and off, and we want to thank you for your wonderful influence on Jeremy. We will miss you and wish you the best!

Like soccer, guiding our young people toward becoming responsible adults is a team game. Youth sports coaches many times become members of that team. Yet in Jeremy's case there were other committed members of his team. There was a school principal who took the time to get to know Jeremy and put him in the best possible setting for success. There were parents who made the effort to hold him accountable for his behavior even at a young age. And hopefully as he grows older there will be others who will continue to nurture him towards a productive adult life. Chances are each of you will one day have the opportunity and privilege of getting someone you encounter off the "academically ineligible" list. All the best in that endeavor.

Sam Denny
Class of 1969