

Lifetime Coach

When I was 12 and my brother was 9 our father was our Little League baseball coach. I treasure the experience for a number of reasons beyond the fact that our team, after a slow start, finished as league champion. My father used the baseball diamond to teach all of us life lessons as to giving your best effort, being alert and aware, and being positive and supportive towards others. I knew my father to be an outstanding youth coach—I was told that by a number of people. And after that memorable season I determined that I wanted to follow in his footsteps as a youth sports coach.

Beginning at age 13 I spent five seasons as a volunteer coaching tee ball at a large metropolitan Little League baseball program. From there I coached older players at the same Little League program off and on for seven seasons with time taken off in between as I became a parent. Yet the majority of my coaching activity took place in an unexpected setting. That was as a volunteer youth soccer coach for 4 and 5 year olds at the local YMCA.

I began coaching soccer when my son was 5. I had never played the game and was not sure there was much I could teach young players. Yet I soon learned that beyond being encouraging and enthusiastic I only needed to pass on two basic concepts to the players—which way they were to go on the field and where the restroom facilities were. With time I found I loved the structure the game of soccer could teach children of such a young age. Even after my son got older I continued coaching at this age level, leaving after 20 years only because I had responsibilities towards aging parents.

At age 60 I thought my coaching career was over. Yet when my grandson came of an age to play organized sports I found myself called on again to coach. This time my fellow coaches were my son and daughter. I anticipated coaching my grandson until he moved on to the next age level. From there I envisioned myself fully retired from coaching.

My grandson's final season started uneventfully enough, but around the middle of the season I became ill and was hospitalized for emergency abdominal surgery. I was unable to finish the season with the team as coach but was able to be present for the team's final game. The day of the last game I watched from the team bench and could observe my son and daughter as they were passing on the lessons of effort, awareness, and support to each child. After the game was over awards were presented to each team member. Yet it was the final award presented that touched me at the core of my being.

My son got up and in front of the team and the parents presented me with a "Lifetime Coach" award. I was given an engraved jewelry box and a soccer ball with a touching message from my daughter written on it. The gesture brought me completely to tears. What greater tribute can parents be given by their children than being told in front of others that they have been an inspirational role model? I left the field that day completely overwhelmed with emotion. As I told both of my children "it has been a great

ride.” And it was a ride that had begun over 50 years before—starting and ending with valuable life’s lessons being passed on from parent to child.

I have often wondered what it would have been like to have coached with my father. My father became disabled only two years after that special baseball season and as such was no longer able to coach youth sports. Yet in a way my father never stopped coaching. Despite his physical limitations he never stopped giving his best effort whether as husband, father or friend. As parents all of us are life coaches for our children. The instruction does not always occur on an athletic field. The awards are not always a championship trophy. But when the payoff for one’s efforts is being told in front of others that you have been an inspiration to those you have encountered, how can you not walk away a winner? May each of you have such a moment of honor over the course of your lifetime.

Sam Denny
Class of 1969