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COACHING LESSONS FROM CO-REC SOFTBALL (Reprinted from Winter 2004 Connections)

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Editor's note: Since we have many subscribers who may never have looked at our archives, we thought we'd take the opportunity to revisit an intriguing article from an older issue of Connections. This one seemed particularly well-suited to summertime! —D.L.

Bouncing Balls

I have always loved games that involve lots of people and bouncing balls. They seem so social, friendly and filled with quirky and unexpected events. In my neighborhood, as a child, to get a game started involved going door to door to find enough people to play at any given time, and usually involved kids of many ages, some adults, and even a dog or two (great fielders!). We had to “close fields” if there weren't enough players, expand and contract teams around mealtimes, and often the youngest kids were pinch runners for the adults. I loved the inclusiveness and ornate strategies that evolved from so many variables. I also learned a lot about how different personalities respond to different situations.

Though I played in more formal leagues, it was never as much fun. As an adult, I couldn't really find the right situation to enjoy the many adult softball leagues here in the Midwest. It seemed way too competitive and not very much fun.

That changed five years ago when I was asked to be on a Co-Recreational softball team, right around the time I became part of my first Critical Friends Group. As time has pro-

gressed, I've become a coach for both groups and it is hard not to notice some overlap in skills required to be effective in both roles.

Field Notes for CFG coaching:

Ideas are a lot like bouncing balls and tossing them around in a group of colleagues can yield unexpected insights. People come to the table from different backgrounds, some have scars from previous group interactions and need to make sure their ideas will be listened to.

The Rules of Engagement

The “extra” rules of Co-Recreational softball involve trying to balance issues of perceived power: having the same number of men and women on a team (two each in the outfield, infield and pitcher/catcher combination); men must bat opposite handed (than their “natural hand”) and use a bigger ball (that will not carry as far) when batting. Walking a man is two bases, to discourage pitching around women in the order. Batting orders must alternate genders. The rules, especially at first, feel artificial (not to mention sexist) and awkward, to say the least.

Still, in the two years we've played as a teacher/parent/spouse/alumni team, we've had a huge amount of enjoyment playing this hybrid game, and enough success (even a few come-from-behind victories). It has also definitely contributed to a feeling of closeness and shared insights within the group, as well as improving our skill level dramatically.

Field Notes for CFG coaching:

Protocols can be awkward at times

and may take explaining and practice. Attempting to “level the playing field” can yield some false assumptions, but sharing the power is an important goal. Having a diverse group increases the knowledge base and pool of insights available.

The Player-Coach

I love the side-by-side quality to being a player-coach, encouraging people as a fellow teammate. I enjoy teaching a specific skill, with permission, and explaining rules and strategies – but mostly players learn from their teammates. I really enjoy it when I can forget who the coach is and the team runs smoothly during the game.

Field Notes for CFG coaching:

The team has most of the skills it needs already in the group. Coaching involves helping to set and honor ground rules. It's challenging to coach a group and be an active member at the same time. If you're going to participate completely, make sure the group is skilled enough to not let you dominate the time! A sign of a strong group dynamic is when the group can share the facilitation.

Diverse Skills and Comfort Zones

I like to ask what positions players want to play, what goals and fears they might have and then work from that space. Some members really only feel comfortable playing one position for a while; others like to switch around. Some of our best games have been when people are needed to fill in for absent team members – there is something about feeling needed that heightens the effort and enjoyment of the game.

Field Notes for CFG coaching:

People have to feel comfortable before sharing and taking risks. The urgency of being asked to help the group work on difficult and important work can bring out the best in members. Switching roles, finding new perspectives to view the discussion increases the possibilities of learning.

Second Chances

There are so many ways to contribute to a successful softball game – a nice catch, hit, throw, backing up a fellow fielder, or hustling down to first. Mistakes have a way of becoming the “before picture” of the next inning or game when you make the perfect play.

So many skills are critical that there is always a way to help while we develop new skills.

Field Notes for CFG coaching:

There are so many skills that support clear communication. We all make mistakes along the way. Over a whole year (or more) as we practice protocols together we have many opportunities to improve and support our own toolbox of skills.

Who's Coach?

Our last game was a make-up for a rained-out game early in the season. The other team didn't show up. We were all there and ready to play. With little prompting, we split up into small teams and had our own game – filled with closed fields, pinch hitters and guest runners from the bleachers. We were relaxed and enjoying ourselves – not only comfortable with the rules and tools of the game, but also creating new rules (our scoring system was especially unique that game). We were all coaches.

Field Notes for CFG coaching:

Ultimately a team becomes a selfpropelling, synergistic group of potential coaches. The final meeting is the one you remember most during the summer vacation.

The Off Season

Working well together carries over into enjoying and valuing each other's skills. Shared moments of success help clear the way for all kinds of day-to-day interactions. The pattern of positive feedback and gentle kidding helps to keep communication channels open for the important and sometimes difficult work of teaching.

Field Notes for CFG coaching:

It's clear to me that my CFG group has helped me look more insightfully than I could by myself at my own teaching practice -- in that sense it is much more than a game. Still, I find that most of my effort as a CFG coach is in helping to create and keep an environment where people are relaxed and ready for the unexpected – requirements for thinking out of their comfort zone.

