

Coaching with Constructive Criticism

Kids can be very critical of themselves when they make mistakes. In addition to that if they are also criticized by a parent or coach, it can lead to a player losing confidence in his ability and playing tentative for fear of making another mistake. As a coach or parent you can help build the confidence of players by handling mistakes in a positive manner. John Wooden, the great UCLA coach, understood the importance of positive reinforcement. It didn't mean he wasn't critical of his players, but he would provide feedback in a way that was beneficial. Constructive criticism is the process of providing both positive and negative comments in a friendly helpful manner, instead of a negative manner.

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Fear of Failure

Watch any game from youth through the professional level and you'll see plays not being made because the player was more afraid of failure than anything else. In my opinion, fear of failure, is a more important in a player not being able to perform during a critical situation than any other factor. Sure, it's true that a player may be over matched in a given situation, but even then the fear of failure will often take the small opportunity for success and reduce it even further.

Young players are **motivated by achievements** and most do not respond well to criticism. They want to get better and

they will try hard when they feel good about what they are doing. If a player is practicing ground balls and his coaching is yelling, "Stay in front of the ball", "Keep your glove down", "Use both hands", and the player is struggling, he may want to give up. His confidence is being reduced by each instruction being yelled in his direction. As you read this over, you might think, "So, how else is he going to learn if I don't tell him what he's doing wrong?". This is a very natural way of providing feedback for most people. We compliment the good plays and criticize the bad plays. We label the criticism as "constructive criticism" which makes us feel like it's not a negative thing. How do the kids feel about this 'constructive criticism'? It, like many things, depends on the individual, but if they are not feeling good about their play or their ability, then this criticism isn't going to help improve their performance. If it's not going to help them then we can't label it 'constructive criticism'. In a game we want our players to have very short memories. We want them to forget about a bad play and focus on the rest of the game. Does criticism of a bad play, no matter what the intention, help the player do that? In my experience, the answer is no. It will not help lift them up and get them prepared for the next opportunity, it just gives them reinforcement that they did something wrong.

So that leaves a bit of a problem: How do we provide feedback to our players during a game that will help prevent the same mistake from happening again, while allowing them to move on and focus on the rest of the game?

The method I use came from a coaching effectiveness training seminar that I have been to a couple of times. It was presented

by Dr. Frank Smoll, a Professor of Psychology at the University of Washington. He covered a number of topics during the session and one of the strategies I have found very effective in dealing with mistakes. This strategy is not unique to this coaching seminar, as I have seen it written about in a number of different publications. **Here is my interpretation of that strategy:**

1. Not every mistake requires that you give instruction. If a player knows what he did wrong and knows how to correct it, there's no need for you to tell him. Simply encourage the player with a positive statement.
2. If you feel the player needs some instruction or reminder to keep from making the mistake again, "sandwich" the instruction inside of supportive statements. Here is an example:

Player picks his glove up on a ground ball and it gets by him letting a run score. He comes to the dugout after the inning. He's upset and knows he cost his team a run.

Coach: "Billy, you did an excellent job of getting in front of that ground ball, your footwork was perfect." (**positive supportive statement about what he did right**)

Coach: "Remember to keep your glove on the ground and then move it up if needed." (**instruction**)

Coach: "In practice we worked on that and you were fielding really well. Now on the next ground ball that is hit to you, field it just the way you have been in practice and make a strong

throw." (**supportive statements that reflect on a positive experience along with the potential positive outcome of the next ground ball.**)

By using this approach, I have found that the player will see that I'm confident in his ability to make the play and won't dwell as long on the mistake. I have found that timing is also important. Some kids need a couple of minutes to deal with the mistake before I talk with them, others will look for that support right away.

It takes practice to make this type of feedback a habit, especially during a game, when you have so much going on. I hope you find it to be a helpful strategy in dealing with player mistakes.

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