

THE BOYS OF SUMMER



PHOTO COURTESY OF TIM HOLLENBACH

"Keep the team pictures. All of them," says Tim Hollenbach (standing, far right) to other youth league coaches. "If you do your job right, the images of those faces will keep you warm all winter." Joe Daesch is at the far left in the front row in this photo from 2001.

Put Joe in the game, coach

Some advice to volunteer coaches: Don't leave out kids like Joe. Let them play, and they'll never forget you — and you won't forget them.

BY TIM HOLLENBACH

Joe went out for his high school baseball team this spring, but he didn't make it. In fact, he was one of the first kids cut. It wasn't really a surprise. Joe is a little undersized and isn't blessed with an abundance of natural baseball ability. Joe wasn't that disappointed; there will be other chances.

Besides, Joe's already on my team. I learned a long time ago that I don't have to cut kids like Joe. For me, coaching's an avocation, not an occupation, and the compensation is not financial.



Tim Hollenbach, 47, of O'Fallon, Ill., is a freelance writer.

I had been a volunteer coach for about 10 years the first time I met Joe Daesch, who was about 6 years old at the time. He was standing away from the other kids, shy and a little afraid to come on the field. Joe's mom, Kristy Lauer, was about ready to give up on getting young Joe to play sports when I walked over, bent down on a knee, got him to laugh at something stupid and got him to join the rest of us on the field.

Joe has played on my teams ever since. He is a good-fielding center-fielder who smiles, hustles all the time and no longer is shy about it. He just wants to play ball. In a tournament game a couple of years ago, I almost pulled him for a pinch-hitter when he came up against a kid about twice his size. But Joe went right to the plate, fouled off a couple of pitches and eventually coaxed a walk.



There will come a time when you look over at a kid like Joe and think that you can't possibly start him in a so-called key game and expect to win. Remember that you're not Tony LaRussa or a high school coach, and your decision will be a lot easier.

I think we won the game, but I'm not sure. I don't remember many of the games; I remember the kids. I keep the team pictures, not the trophies. The cool thing about coaching is, the kids remember you, too.

It's spring, and that means many of us will take to the ball fields and try to recapture, through coaching, a piece of our own childhood. Some of us will try to give our

children something we never had, like a championship season. More of us will try to give our children what we remember: wonder years on the ball field and a lifetime of love of the game. Either way, it's a spring fever that can last all summer.

It can transform placid business executives and stay-at-home moms into screaming Tony LaRussa wannabees hellbent on taking a coach-pitch baseball team of 7 year olds to a league championship. It can cause a cash-strapped, over-the-credit-limit parent to pony up \$300 for a titanium bat that promises to make 4-foot-9-inch Jimmy into the power hitter of his Bantam Khoury league team.

This fever will force families to reschedule reunions, vacations and visits to Grandma. It will mean a summer of fast-food car trips to "select" tournaments thousands of miles away. It will generate tears, scars, broken hearts, joy and a lifetime of memories.

As a coaching dad who has survived the fever, I have some advice for first-time coaches, whatever their gender:

There will come a time when you look over at a kid like Joe and think that you can't possibly start him in a so-called key game and expect to win. Take a deep breath and remember that a time will come soon enough for Joe, as it does for all of us, when he's told he's not good enough, that he's cut, that he won't be getting in the game. Remember that you're not Tony LaRussa or the high school coach, and your decision will be a lot easier.

Put Joe in, coach. Win or lose, you'll forget the game, but you won't forget Joe. He surely won't forget you.

And take and keep the team pictures. All of them. If you do your job right, the images of those faces will keep you warm all winter.