

“Put Joe in the game, Coach”



Joe Daesch is at the far left in the front row in this photo from 2001.

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 is 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.

I had been a volunteer coach for about ten years the first time I met Joe Daesch, who was about six 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 to give up on getting young Joe to play sports when I walked over to him, 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 centerfielder who smiles, hustles all the time and no longer shy about it. He just wants to play ball. In a tournament game a couple years ago, I almost pulled him for a pinch hitter when he came up against a kid pitcher about twice his size. But Joe went right to the plate, fouled off a couple pitches and eventually coaxed a walk.

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 capture, 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 love of the game. Either way, it's a spring fever that will last all summer.

It can transform placid business executives and stay-at-home moms into screaming Tony LaRussa wanna-bees hellbent on taking a coach-pitch team of seven years olds to a league championship. It can cause a cash-strapped, over-the credit limit parent to pony up \$500 for a titanium bat that promises to make 4-foot-7-inch Jimmy into the power hitter of his 'select' 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 hundred of miles away. It will generate tears, scars, broken hearts, joy and a lifetime of memories.

As an ex-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 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.

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