



FOR WHAT IT'S WORTH

"The Ultimate Soccer Dad"

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The Fightin' Cobra Snakes soccer team held its end-of-year banquet the other night and my daughter took home the prestigious Leadership Award. As the coach, I made up all the awards and chose the recipients so I took the opportunity to (try to) teach a life lesson that may not have been captured as well with a Perfect Attendance certificate. I thought leadership would bring her a certain pride and denote a maturity level as she was rewarded for her (mostly) positive attitude and her ability to bring out the best in her teammates. (Not to mention...she always led the Simon Says stretching exercises prior to each practice and game.) Unfortunately, she seemed far more enthusiastic about the Best Costume award (one of the Transformers) that she won from her friend's Halloween party. Despite the missed teaching point, the season was a great success.

I was honored to be asked to coach the team (after four other dads had declined), but had certain reservations about my ability and competency. As a pretty solid three-sport high school athlete (spectator, not participant), I looked forward to the day when I would be able to share my knowledge and experiences with a new generation of Brounes prodigies and their friends. In my new coaching role, I assumed I would be working with future college scholarship athletes; future Olympians; future MLS Cup MVPs; maybe even future Hall of Famers. (After the first practice, I realized I was actually working with future accountants, lawyers, doctors, and stock brokers.)

I must admit, I was a tad nervous that I would not be up to the task. For starters, I never played soccer; I've never been to a soccer game and have never even watched one on TV (though I've seen that famous Brandi Chastain World Cup highlight many many times). Heck, I don't even know the rules to soccer. Fortunately, there are no prerequisites to coach in the "five and under" youth league. Just pass a comprehensive background check (which has grown in importance in the aftermath of Penn State) and you're good to go. To help get up to speed, I google-searched "youth soccer coaching" and invested in "The Baffled Parent's Guide to Coaching 6-and-Under Soccer." I quickly mastered the proper positioning for the goalie and the best technique for a corner kick. Soon after, I attended the parents' meeting where I learned that goalies are not allowed in "Under 5" soccer, and when balls go out of bounds, the coach merely throws another one back in so the play never stops. (Anyone want to buy a barely used "The Baffled Parent's Guide to Coaching 6-and-Under Soccer?") The main goal of this league is simply for the kids to have fun (and to be totally wiped out before bedtime). If they actually learn something in the process, that's all bonus. (I'm not sure learning came into play for the Fightin' Cobra Snakes.)

LET THE GAMES BEGIN

The teams play a three-on-three format so each kid has plenty of opportunities to get involved in the action on both offense and defense (or assume a cheerleading role on the sidelines as a few of my players preferred...I had an apparent Allen Iverson fan who hated to practice, but always showed up game day ready to play). League officials realized the ineptitude of certain coaches (was I that obvious?), so they provided experienced trainers for the first few practices to work with the kids and show us the ropes. At one session, my kids were so amazed by the dribbling and kicking skills of our trainer that they insisted he kick the ball as hard and as far as he could. Unfortunately, his best effort went awry and the ball sailed directly into the face of one of my players. Needless to say, we had a different trainer the following week (and the potential lawsuit was put on hold). Practices and games ended in a spirited round of Duck Duck Goose which occasionally brought tears because one kid or another (usually mine) didn't get picked by one of their friends. (I should have bought "The Baffled Parent's Guide to Duck Duck Goose.")

When the games began, I had no idea how our team would stack up with the rest of the league (not that it mattered since no scores are kept). Still, I wanted the kids to have a good time and not get demoralized if we were overmatched. Fortunately, one of our players happened to be among the best in the league (probably any league) so he kept us in all the games even when some of his teammates got distracted and went looking for mid-game snacks. This kid could score whenever he got the ball from practically anywhere on the field (a combination of natural athletic ability and excellent coaching, no doubt). In the spirit of good sportsmanship, I occasionally asked him to take it easy late in games and help other players score or simply play defense. During one game, however, we played against a team with a very intense coach who obviously had a failed soccer career and now was living vicariously through his (equally intense) four-year old son. At one point, I actually caught this “clown” (the dad, not the son) laughing at my players when our MVP was taking a water break. On that occasion, I was more than happy to put our star player back in the game (and never take him out again) and turn him loose directly on the coach’s son (so much for sportsmanship). We won that game 11-9 (not that anyone was keeping score).

GAME OF THE YEAR

The highlight of the season (besides the weekly heart-healthy snacks) came when the Fightin’ Cobra Snakes played our heated rivals from school, the Houston Shark Attack. We had the date circled on our calendars for weeks. As the big day closed in, everyone (parents, kids, teachers, Rabbis alike) couldn’t help but feel the immense excitement. We felt it while walking the hallowed halls of the pre-school when we saw the “enemy” with smug looks standing at their lockers. We sensed the nervousness of the kids as they could barely finish their dinners each night (well, my kid never eats dinner). We assumed the opposing coach was pulling all-nighters, mapping out strategies, trick plays, and new cheers for the biggest game of the year. (I certainly was.) The matchup had appropriately been named The Atonement Bowl as it was scheduled for the Sunday after Yom Kippur. I instructed my players not to fast in order to conserve strength (and then did an extra “Aveenu Malkaynu” at services to make up for it). The game lived up to everyone’s expectations (I was probably the only one with expectations) and the kids on both teams played their hearts out. Despite a few “minor” rule infractions that we failed to report (one member of the Shark Attack was not wearing the required uniform and another kid blatantly camped out as a goalie), the teams battled to a hard fought tie (not that anyone was keeping score). Though talks of a rematch began immediately, one never materialized. We all left the field in positive spirits, but the day ended on a sour note...we forgot to play Duck Duck Goose.

ONE OF THE GUYS

I must admit, I loved the coaching experience and have signed up for round two, this time in basketball. We had a great group of kids and very nice (very young) parents, many of whom will be back for the next league (though our best player got poached by a rival team). Mainly I relished spending time with my daughter. She is a bit of a tomboy whose best friends are boys and I know her opportunity for co-ed leagues will end one day soon. While she likes sports to some degree, she truly enjoyed the league more because she was on a team with her best boy friends and they could play superheroes and bad guys before/after the games and during timeouts. She is not that athletically gifted (she scored occasionally for us AND for the other team), and was just as thrilled when one of her teammates succeeded (a fine leadership quality). We know that one day soon she will enjoy shopping and makeup and jewelry, and her numerous superhero t-shirts will get donated to Goodwill (my wife insists daughter number 2 will be a girly girl). She will watch iCarly, worry about her figure, and talk back to her parents (wait, she already does that). For now, I just want to enjoy these “carefree” days for as long as they last. The main goal of the league was to have fun; mission accomplished as far as we’re concerned. My daughter, the leader, loved the team experience (except when she wasn’t picked right away by her friends during Duck Duck Goose) and I loved being able to spend some very quality time with her.