

THE VOLUNTEER COACH

Influential coach on mission to improve youth sports

"You have taken on one of the most beautiful, powerful, and influential positions a person can ever have."

— John O'Sullivan,
Changing The Game Project

Since I started writing this column for New England Soccer Journal in 2013, it always has been my goal to support those of you who have chosen to be a youth soccer coach. From my opinion to the opinions of others, it has been my task to best support all of you and therefore support your growing players.

Coaching for me is my life, my passion. I like to believe that I have indeed taken on a role that is beautiful, powerful and influential. As a son of two lifelong educators and as a player for a number of fantastic soccer coaches, my path most definitely has been supported through guidance, encouragement and kindness.

One of those fantastic soccer coaches that I had the distinct pleasure to play for and learn from was John O'Sullivan, founder of the Changing of the Game Project (changingthegameproject.com).

John founded the Changing the Game Project in 2012 with an important purpose in mind. He wanted to figure out why 70 percent of roughly 40 million children playing youth sports quit playing by the time they reach the age of 13. John has played college and professional soccer, and he has coached at the college and elite club level, but as a parent of a 5-year-old youth soccer player, he came across the ugliness of competitiveness in youth sports while standing on the sideline of his daughter's game. John saw a coach and the parents of a 10-year-old player, participating in what is supposed to be

a fun game, yelling at him for making a mistake. He was baffled at what he was seeing and hearing. In his opinion, he was witnessing the game being taken away from this young player. The game and everything that should be positive about it was being ruined and taken away by adults.

That moment — as well as a fantastic amount of study and research — has driven John to lead the fight to change the game in youth sports and to give it back to the kids who are playing in them.

As John embarked on his mission to change the game, he came across these incredibly important takeaways that he now highlights in his book, "Changing the Game," his appearances and all other aspects of his amazing project:

- The single greatest effect on performance is an athlete's state of mind.

- Youth sports used to be about children competing against other children; now it is often adults competing against other adults through their children.

- Children play sports because it is fun; winning comes in way down the list.

- Children quit sports when they don't get to play, and when winning becomes more important than enjoyment.

- 90 percent of children would rather play on a losing team than sit on the bench for a winning team.

- Competition is important, but being competitive comes from putting the needs and priorities of our children first

- John learned five amazing words from his own coaching mentor, coach Bruce Brown: "I love watching you

play." These five words have allowed Brown, O'Sullivan and countless other coaches and parents the ability to show and express to their players and children that their love for them is not defined by winning and losing.

The Changing of the Game Project website provides a significant amount of literature in the form of blogs from John, links to recent articles, interviews and media appearances. It also provides support specifically for coaches and parents in an effort to help change the game, including videos that I have found fantastically appropriate for volunteer coaches.

One particular blog that I encourage everyone to read is entitled, "Why Kids Quit Sports." In this blog, John references a 2014 George Washington University study conducted by researcher Amanda Visik, who highlights the top five answers of "what kids want from a coach." Visik's research supports John's project as the answers can be seen here:

1. Respect & Encouragement
2. Positive Role Model
3. Clear, Consistent Communication
4. Knowledge of Sport
5. Someone Who Listens

As a walk-on at the University of Vermont in the fall of 1999, I was a little fish fighting for a spot in a big pond. I did not know any of the other players or the coaches. All that I felt that I had accomplished at the high school level meant little to the head coach or my peers. It was clear from the get-go that I would have to battle for a spot on the team, and if I were to earn that spot, that I would be a depth player at best behind some of the upperclassmen who had

earned their stripes. I was fortunate to be named to the official roster, but I was even more fortunate to have spent most of my freshman year on the practice squad being coached by John.

John's approach was engaging, friendly and ultimately comforting. He knew his stuff, but he also knew how to relate to players in my situation. John would oftentimes put us through our own training for large portions of practice while the starting 11 were at the other end of the training ground. He was a coach we looked up to, respected and wanted to play for.

Looking back on those days now, it is not surprising to understand how and realize why John has become such an influential leader in youth sports today. He is working to change the game and I am hopeful that some of you will join the movement to do the same:

"The mission of the Changing the Game Project is to ensure that we return youth sports to our children, and put the 'play' back in 'play ball.' We want to provide the most influential adults in our children's lives — their parents and coaches — with the information and resources they need to make sports a healthy, positive, and rewarding experience for their children, and their whole family. Parenting and coaching young athletes is an art, not a science, and the information you find here can help you navigate the maze of youth sports, and put a smile on your young athlete's face, whether he or she is 6 or 16 years old."



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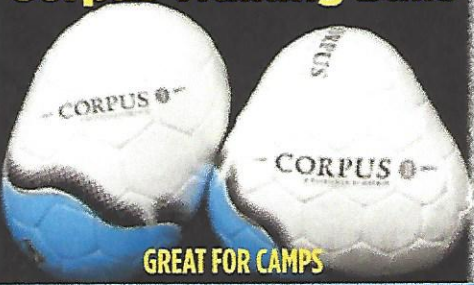
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