



## CHAPTER 1

# The Unknown Athlete

Somewhere between the ages of six and eight years there will be an opportunity available for children to have their first organized athletic experience. These opportunities may begin at a later age, which is fine. There is no magic number. The beginning experience will include learning the fundamentals of the sport and how to apply those fundamentals to playing the game with others.

I question how many people stop to think about what these Unknown Athletes are going through in getting their feet wet for the first time. Has anyone asked them what they expect, want, or fear in being involved in this very life-impacting experience?

Or, do we just “talk at them,” telling them what it will be like. Do we ever find out what they want to get out of playing? Do we ask them what they want to learn? You may be surprised at how much they already know. I do not want you to be “heavy” about this. Just a light inquiry will do.

This exercise is very useful for you as a parent and is a must if you are a youth coach. Since so many of you are both parent and coach I am speaking to both of you. The more they get what they came for, the easier it will be for you to coach them.

The primary intention of the Coach needs to be the growth and development of these very young people through the sports experience.

Organizing your practices, teaching the basics of the sport, and developing team interaction will be important; and, can be found in other books and publications.



*How good they  
become at the  
sport is useful  
but a very, very  
distant second.*

*The only thing  
more distant is  
whether or not  
their team wins.*



Focus on the children and provide them with constructive feedback. Love and support are things that both the coach and parent can deliver. Acknowledge their major and minor accomplishments. Be verbally supportive (“You can do it!”). Every word that comes out of the your mouth can have a tremendous impact on the child.

Focus on the children and deliver what they came for, as well as what they didn’t know they would get that supports their growth and development.

What does the athlete hope to get out of participating?

What are the natural attractions?

What are the discovered benefits that have these athletes continue to play the game?

## **WHAT THE ATHLETE HOPES TO GET**

### ***Natural Attractions***

I don’t think children consciously think about what they will get out of participating, initially. To run, jump, skip or throw is something children naturally do that is fun and provides a physical as well as an emotional high. To do those things in concert with other children is even better. This is especially true when we feel that we are a part of something bigger than we are; when we somehow fit in or belong. This might explain the attraction for being on a team.

The young athlete’s view of participation is really very simple. To be physically active, learn something new to try out, and spend time with other kids in the process is about all the Unknown Athlete expects.

## **THE DISCOVERED BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATION**

So what is it that the young Unknown Athlete is likely to discover about participating in sports that will keep him/her coming back for more?

**FUN...** Every child wants to have fun and they have the opportunity to find out they can do that with lots of different kids in the same activity.

**LEARN...** They will be learning new stuff. This will include all the things they learn to do, as well as what they learn about themselves.

**ACCOMPLISHMENT...** When the child learns something and can successfully repeat it over and over, accomplishment—as well as satisfaction and confidence—are the rewards. Wouldn't you be excited about the next opportunity to play if that was the case?

**RELATIONSHIPS...** Having new friends is always a great event and teammates are another iteration of that. In addition, the development of the relationships with coaches as teachers, mentors and even friends is HUGE. These relationships take away one of the biggest issues for people: uncertainty. The Unknown Athlete has a team to count on.

**PERSISTENCE...** If I could give each child only one quality it would be persistence. Having a failure, learning from it and persisting to play the game is one of the great lessons available to the Unknown Athlete. Athletic competition gives every athlete many opportunities to practice.

So what does this mean for the coach and the parent? In a nutshell this provides a road map to be successful. It is your job to make sure that the opportunity is there for each athlete to experience all of the above.

- You bring fun by having fun (lighten up).
- Be a patient teacher.
- Acknowledge their accomplishments—the big and the small—equally.
- Be clear how you will treat each other (player-coach, player-player, player-parent).
- Let them know what they can count on from you (on their behalf).
- Find out what they want and make sure they get it.

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*Never, ever  
quit on one of  
your athletes!*  
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## QUALITIES OF THE UNKNOWN ATHLETE

What is it these young athletes will naturally contribute to the process if we provide an effective environment? Here are some observations.