

21 LIFE LESSONS KIDS LEARN THROUGH YOUTH SPORTS



'Use youth sports as a medium to teach young players life lessons'.

Youth sports are going to teach young players a lot more than how to shoot a basketball or how to use a pick-and-roll, there are a lot of life lessons players will learn on their journey through participation in youth sports.

These life lessons are by far the most important part of participation in youth sports. Not winning a few basketball tournaments or making a highly competitive team.

Let's be honest, players have a [very, very slim chance of playing professional sports](#). I don't say this to be harsh or pessimistic, but to emphasise the importance of focusing on how you can help every single player you coach. Not just the 2 or 3 in 10,000 that end up playing professionally.

You can make a difference in their lives long-term by helping them learn the 21 important life lessons listed below that I believe all kids learn through youth sports.

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1. It's Okay to Make Mistakes

There will be many times when players make mistakes during games or practice. Whether that be losing the basketball in a dribbling drill, turning the ball over during a game, or taking a bad shot.

Coaches have to reassure their players that it's okay to make these mistakes, they're learning experiences.

A good coach will challenge the players to evaluate the mistake themselves with questions such as *'Why do you think that happened?'* and *'What could you do next time to change the outcome?'*

As long as players are learning from their mistakes, they should be pushing themselves and making as many mistakes as they can.

2. How to be a Leader

Throughout a youth sports season all players should have the opportunity to be a leader on their team.

This could be as simple as making a different player responsible for warm-ups before each practice, allowing the players to make decisions, or rotating the captain of each game.

If given these opportunities to lead, players will become much more confident leading others and develop leadership skills that most kids rarely have the opportunity to learn.

3. How to be a Follower

Just as it's important to learn how to lead others, it's also incredibly important that players learn how to be lead by others.

Having a coach is in a lot of ways similar to having a boss. The coach is an authority figure that will be giving instruction, praise, and criticism to the player.

By experiencing how to follow, players will learn how to take instructions, how to respectfully question authority, and even patience if they disagree.

This will give them plenty of lessons as to how they want to lead in the future.

“If you want to lead the people, you must learn how to follow them” – Lao Tzu.

4. Body Language Speaks Volumes

Body language says a lot about how a person is feeling and what they're thinking.

I've found a lot of players display poor body language without even realising it and youth sports is a great medium to address that since most coaches won't accept it on their team.

Players will quickly learn that if they throw their hands in the air in disgust because a teammate fumbled a pass, it's a poor display of sportsmanship and they'll quickly find themselves on the bench next to the coach.

Similarly, [while on the bench](#) players better make sure they're displaying positive body language.

It's well known that body language is one of the main criteria that recruiters look at when evaluating players so it's best to get it under control while the players are young.

5. How to Control Emotions

Youth sports can be frustrating. Not only for the players, but for parents and coaches too.

There will be games when the referees don't seem like they even have a whistle in their mouth. Every player will experience games where the basketball just won't go in the ring.

When these things happen, players will learn that getting angry or frustrated about it doesn't help the situation and inevitably impacts performance.

There will be times when players get so worked up that they receive a technical foul which can be a great learning experience for a player if handled correctly by the coach.

Experiencing feelings of frustration and anger and learning how to control them will help players in all aspects of their lives.

6. Setting and Achieving Goals

I'm a big believer in goal-setting in all aspects of life. Everyone should do it.

Youth sports is a great place to learn how to set goals and determine how to achieve them with no repercussions if they fall short or fail.

Players will learn that setting goals gives you a target to reach for and adds motivation while on the journey to achieving them.

They'll then learn the important step of figuring out how you're going to reach those goals by breaking them down into achievable steps.

You can't just set goals and cross your fingers that they'll come true, you need to work out a plan and work hard to make them come true.

I first started setting goals in youth sports and now set them in all aspects of my life. Hopefully the players you coach will be the same.

7. Success Requires Hard Work

Players will learn that the best players are usually the players that have worked the hardest on improving their game. While talent definitely plays its role early on, sooner or later it's the hardest workers that rise to the top.

This will show them that if they want to become great at anything, whether that be the guitar, learning a foreign language, then it's going to take hard work. And a lot of it.

There are no short cuts. There's no magic words. Being great at something takes hard, consistent work.

As the team begins to see their hard work paying off, make sure to point out to them that it's their consistent, hard work that has led them to these improvements.

This would also be a good time to point out how they will see similar improvements if they work hard at anything else they want to do or achieve in life.



8. How to Win/Succeed with Class

In youth sports there is definitely a right and a wrong way to win.

I've seen some disgusting acts of sportsmanship from players and coaches on winning teams. Mocking their opponents, refusing to shake hands, and other forms of horrible behaviour.

Good coaches will teach their players how to be proud of their achievements without putting down their opponents.

This often involves shaking hands after the game with the referees and opposition players and giving positive comments to each players such as 'good game' or 'nice shooting'.

Although, how a players acts after a game should be the same regardless of a win or a loss.

9. How to Lose/Fail with Dignity

Youth sports is the ultimate environment for players to experience the emotions and feelings that come from failure and defeat since there are no long-term consequences of losing.

This can be after losing a grand final, being cut from a team they really wanted to make, or missing a game-winning shot.

Good coaches will teach players to lose with dignity and respect, and that there is always a learning experience to come out of every loss or failure.

Players should always shake the hands of the referees and the opponents after every game and not blame the loss on external sources like the referees or the court conditions.

One of the best things I like to do after a loss is to first ask the team what they can learn from the loss. What should we have done differently? Where do we need to improve in order to be better next time? Allow them to evaluate the loss.

10. Success Requires Sacrifice

There's only a certain amount of time in each day and players will soon realise that they can't do everything. They'll have to sacrifice certain things to spend more time on what they consider more important.

This requires players to determine their priorities which is a great skill for later in life.

Players will realise that if they're determined to put in the work to be a great basketball player as well as keep up with their studies, then they won't be able to attend every party that their friends do. They simply won't have time.

They'll be forced to use their time more productively. This might mean instead of spending another night out with their friends, they're in the gym working on their shot.

This lesson will serve them well when they get to exams and have to make studying a priority.

11. Know Your Strengths and Weaknesses

Everyone has different strengths and weaknesses.

It's important for all players to know what they're good at and what they struggle with so that they can address their weaknesses and play to their strengths.

This allows players to understand how they can best contribute to the team during games and what areas of their game they should be working on.

I'm a big believer that this skill of self-evaluation is super important.

One of the best ways to teach this is to hand out a piece of paper near the start of each season and get the players to write down what they believe are their 3 biggest strengths and 3 biggest weaknesses.

Keep them confidential and sit down with each player and go through them and explain how best they can help the team using their strengths and share with them different ways they can improve their weaknesses.

12. Being Healthy is Important

Players will have a far greater chance of staying fit and healthy later in life if they play youth sports at a young age.

This is because they develop skills and movements that will carry-over to other sports, going to the gym, running, or other forms of physical activity when they're older.

Children that aren't involved in youth sports typically won't be confident enough in themselves or their physical ability to become active.

While this is a lesson that most players won't realise until they're older, don't be afraid to stress the importance of looking after yourself through regular exercise, [getting enough sleep](#), and eating healthy.

13. You Must Discipline Yourself

Improving your skills on the basketball court means having the self discipline to work hard on the things you need to work on. Not necessarily the things that are the most fun.

Here are a few fantastic quotes on self-discipline from great minds...

"Discipline is doing what has to be done, when it has to be done, as well as it can be done, and doing it that way all the time" – Bobby Knight

"The only lasting form of discipline is self-imposed discipline" – Dale Brown

"Discipline yourself, and others won't need to" – John Wooden

By disciplining themselves to work on their game, players will see results that will motivate them and they'll be glad they put in the effort to get better.

This will teach players that it's important to choose what's best for the long-term instead of seeking instant gratification.

14. How to Deal with Pressure and Stress

Whether we like it or not, there can be a lot of pressure in youth sports.

Some of this is attributed to overbearing parents who unfairly demand excellence of their children on the basketball court, while some of it is simply the normal pressure of close and intense games.

Youth sports allows players to learn how to deal with the nerves and stress they feel in these situations in a safe environment.

There will undoubtedly be times where players are overwhelmed by the occasion and the pressure will get to them resulting in tears or simply not wanting to play anymore.

This is all a learning experience and will help them get comfortable with pressure situations they'll encounter later on in life like public speaking or sitting their first exam.



15. You're Responsible For Yourself

Youth sports is one of the first places where children start to take on some serious responsibility.

I always impose a rule early on that it's the players responsibility to bring a drink bottle and their basketball to practice. It's not their parents responsibility to remember for them.

Players will also learn that they are responsible for their actions and for their own improvement.

I don't expect the parents to have to force their players to complete a few ball-handling drills after school each day. This will create unnecessary conflict between the player and their parents.

I emphasise at practice that if they want to improve their game then it's up to themselves to make it happen.

16. Life Isn't Always Fair

This is a tough rule for players to learn at an early age but one that is gradually taught nonetheless.

Injuries happen. There will be missed foul calls. Parents will arrive at the wrong stadium and their child will miss the game.

Things will happen and players have to learn to accept them and move on because most of the time, sulking about it isn't going to change anything.

For those unfortunate enough to experience the full power of this lesson, we've all heard of at least one player that has worked their butt off for months to get ready for a season and then within the first week of pre-season end up blowing out their knee which leaves them sidelined for the season.

Life is tough sometimes.

17. Together Everyone Achieves More

T – Together

E – Everyone

A – Achieves

M – More

A bit corny, isn't it? But it couldn't be more true!

A team will always be more successful if everyone's on the same page and the players are all focused on achieving the same goal.

One single player that deviates from this and only cares about their own points or other statistic is enough to derail a team.

Players will learn that their best chance of success will be through cooperation with their teammates and that this is the same on the court, in the classroom, or professionally.

They'll also gain social skills by interacting with and meeting new people with similar interests which will carry-over into all of their relationships.

They'll learn how to deal with conflicts between teammates, how to interact with a number of different personality types, and even how to get along with people they don't like.

18. There Will be Tough Times

Perseverance is a skill that's important for all players to learn at an early age.

There will be setbacks. They will fail. There will be obstacles they must overcome.

"If you're trying to achieve, there will be roadblocks. I've had them; everybody has had them" – Michael Jordan

Players will experience the emotions that come with these obstacles and failures and will learn how to push through them and not quit when it gets tough.

Teach your players that when times get tough and they feel like quitting to stop looking too far ahead and start thinking step-by-step.

Instead of "I'm never going to be as good as them", change it to "What can I do today to improve where I currently am?".

Then it comes back to consistent hard work and being patient. Remember, success doesn't happen overnight.

19. How to Manage Time Efficiently

Depending on age, most youth sports players have a lot of commitments that they must juggle. Attending school, homework, sports, family, friends, employment, and possibly other activities.

This leads to an overly packed schedule for most players. The only way to get it all done is to prioritise and manage your time efficiently.

As players get old enough to start managing their own time, I encourage parents to allow their children to start developing time management skills by planning their days themselves.

They'll be forced to prioritise what's most important in their life and sacrifice what they consider less important.

Obviously this is done with parental assistance but it's a fantastic skill to work on for their future.

20. Respect Everyone

Through their youth sports journey players will learn the importance of respecting those around them. Not just their coaches and the referees, but also their teammates, the opposition, and everyone else involved.

For this respect to be instilled in players, there must be consequences for acting in a disrespectful manner like putting down a teammate or mocking an opponent.

Coaches can't give empty threats or it will be hard to establish respect. The players must know that when you say you're going to do something, you mean it.

A few ways players can show respect is by not talking when someone else is talking, shaking hands with the opponents and referees after the game, and retrieving the basketball for the referee when it goes out of bounds.

Players must learn that the amount of respect they show others can't be determined by their levels of frustration or the outcome of a basketball game.

The overriding principle of respect being "Treat others how you want to be treated".

21. Focus on What You Can Control

Coaches must make it clear that there are only two things that players can control at all times: their effort and attitude.

There's simply no point sulking over things that you can't change.

Too short? Get out there and work on your handles.

Not as athletic as one of your teammates? Work on anticipating where the pass will be made or where the rebound will land.

This also goes for things that happen during the game.

Think you got fouled when you turned the ball over? The referee didn't call it so there's no point complaining. Get back on defense and contest the shot.

Missed an open shot? It happens! The only thing you can do about it now is get after the rebound or get back on defense.

Players must learn that there's no point dwelling on things that are out of their control. Move on and focus on the things you can control.

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Conclusion

Without taking away from the competitiveness of the sport, coaches must understand that the life lessons learned by players on their youth sports journey are much more important than the final score of a basketball game.

As coaches, it's our duty to do our best to instill as many of these life lessons in our players as we can.

Here's a quick recap:

- 1. It's okay to make mistakes.**
- 2. How to be a leader.**
- 3. How to be a follower.**
- 4. Body language speaks volumes.**
- 5. How to control emotions.**
- 6. Setting and achieving goals.**
- 7. Success requires hard work.**
- 8. How to win/succeed with class.**
- 9. How to lose/fail with dignity.**
- 10. Success requires sacrifice.**
- 11. Know your strengths and weaknesses.**
- 12. Being healthy is important.**
- 13. You must discipline yourself.**
- 14. How to deal with pressure and stress.**
- 15. You're responsible for yourself.**
- 16. Life isn't always fair.**
- 17. Together everyone achieves more.**
- 18. There will be tough times.**
- 19. How to manage time efficiently.**
- 20. Respect everyone.**
- 21. Focus on what you can control.**

To finish this post I'll leave you with a few quotes... *"The world doesn't need more good basketball players, it needs more good husbands, wives, fathers, and mothers".*

"Basketball teaches students lessons that they can't learn in a classroom".