

Play the Ball, Not the Other Team!

by Olan Suddeth

Raise your hand if you have ever uttered one of the following phrases in a close or important game:

"This is it... it's do or die time!"

"The game is on the line!"

"We win now, or we go home."

"We've got to have some runs now!"

"Jimmy, we've got to have an out right here."

Now, the rest of you liars raise your hands.

Yes, we're all guilty of it - adding artificial pressure to a game situation. We want our players to realize how important this game/inning/at bat is, but we end up instead reducing their chances to perform well, thanks to the added pressure we just placed on them.

I once read a very enlightening article by Jack Stallings, who at the time of his retirement was the most winning active baseball coach in the NCAA. Coach Stallings spoke about performance in the clutch, and how baseball was a percentage game. If a player performs at regular levels in clutch situation, he is absolutely a clutch player. The key behind this is to remove the outside pressures associated with a clutch situation. After all, the rules don't change - a batter still has to hit the ball, a pitcher still has to throw strikes, a fielder still has to scoop and throw.

How many times have you heard coaches moan that "if only their team could play as well as they practice"? Did you ever wonder exactly why the team did so poorly in those situations? Sure, the other team has something to do with it, but a team that fields well in practice should still field well in games. A pitcher who throws strikes in warm-ups should do so in clutch situations. A batter who has a good eye and makes solid contact in laid back situations has the ability to do so when the game is on the line.

The secret is to get your team to not look at the scoreboard, to not think about what is at stake, and to not worry about the other team. Baseball comes down to a distinct set of skills, and in practices, those skills are all you care about. Now, translate this to game situations.

Keep your players loose. Focus your coaching on the technical aspects of the game, just as you do in practice. Don't get upset or tense - these emotions are conveyed to your team. Reiterate that they are playing the ball, not the other team, not the scoreboard.

If you can reduce the pressure that kids (and coaches) place on them in "clutch" situations, you will see drastic improvements in their results.

Go forth and follow this advice! I promise that I will try to do the same.