

Ballplayer Makes a Pitch to the Young

by Stephen Sax as appeared in The Wall Street Journal

One of America's great rituals, opening day of the baseball season, is now upon us. As a participant in this ritual for the past 16 years, I can testify that although it has become a sports cliché, there is truly nothing like putting on your uniform to spend another summer playing a kid's game.

Baseball, more than any other sport, is associated with our history and our memories. Americans view baseball especially with nostalgia for simpler, more innocent times. Pictures of children at those early games, complete with hot dogs and cotton candy, reinforce the Norman Rockwell scene we yearn to recreate.

As a father of two young children, I wish this idyllic portrait of American life were the whole reality. But, like other Americans, I am saddened and disturbed by what has been happening to our young people over the past decade.

I use my own experience as a gauge. In the off-season I spend much of my time giving speeches and talking to schoolchildren. As someone who has been called a blue-collar player, making up for limited abilities (at least the sportswriters say they're limited) with hard work, I try to impress upon my young audiences the importance of staying focused on goals and giving one's all. And to depend on one's self, not others, including the government nannies who seem to have sprung up around children over the past few years.

More and more, I worry about the kids I meet, as it gets harder to teach young people about things like independence, self-reliance and a good work ethic. I think it starts off with little things.

For example, I notice an increasing toleration of crude language and vulgarity. As a ballplayer, I am not a prude when it comes to such language — you might as well hang up your spikes if you are, because you'll hear it all on a ball field — but I know that young children's use of such language indicates something much more serious than blowing off steam at an umpire. I've believed that there was general agreement on the need to instill respect in our children — respect for themselves and for others around them. Yet, when a young boy at a school assembly asks me, "Hey, Sax, why the f--- did you leave the Dodgers?" my first thought is that there has been a breakdown here. Evidently, using such language in such a public setting has become the norm for many youngsters, which means that no one is teaching these kids about respect for others, or that such behavior is simply wrong.

I see other indications of this stunted character development. Many young people now seem to think that rather than having to earn the things they want, they are in a society that owes these things to them. Stories of Babe Ruth scraping his way out of an orphanage, or of Roy Campanella overcoming the adversity of his paralysis to lead a productive life, seem like ancient history to kids, not so much because these greats lived so long ago, but because of the sea change in attitude.

Recently, I heard of an eight-year-old child in California who told a youth officer that his philosophy was that if the other person was not strong enough to keep something, then it was all right for him to take it — a natural extension of the "I deserve everything" attitude that seems pervasive today. Violent crimes

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committed by youths have nearly doubled in the past two decades, and many of their victims are the most helpless among us, the elderly. When “taking” rather than “earning” is the preferred means to achieving goals, then the law of the jungle is sure to follow.

Changing the attitudes of our children will require many adults to change their attitudes. We must do more than simply ask our kids to think about their values. Thinking about values without a firm knowledge of right and wrong is like searching for buried treasure without a compass — it is a wasted exercise. Responsible kids need a moral compass because amorality and responsibility are incompatible. To be responsible is to acknowledge that hard work, initiative and consideration for others are good, and that laziness, parasitism and inconsideration are bad. How can we expect young people to be independent if we also say that dependence is OK?

And we have to expect more from young people. Yes, some children do come from underprivileged backgrounds and difficult family situations. But just because these kids have a couple of strikes against them does not mean that society must throw them the third strike of not expecting them to excel.

Finally, we must not be afraid of the concept of discipline. People often talk about the need to love our children. However, discipline and love are two sides of the same coin. By making kids understand the difference between right and wrong behavior, or the need to bear down to achieve a goal, we offer discipline that becomes one of the best expressions of our love for our children. When I see government-run “boot camps” for juvenile delinquents, my thought is that a little discipline early in a child’s life would have saved him this massive dose later on.

On opening day at Comiskey Park in Chicago, and all around the major leagues, thousands of kids will cheer, just as in seasons past. But if our children and our society are to have any hope in the future, we cannot continue our current ways.

—Mr. Sax, an infielder with the Chicago White Sox, is a five-time All-Star and former rookie of the year.

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