

Driver's book helps parents become coaches

Former NHL defenseman shares his ideas on how to instruct young players

BY JANE HANSY
DAILY RECORD

Alan Benaroff keeps a book underneath the pads and skates in his hockey bag. A first-year coach for the Morristown Junior Colonials squirts last winter, Benaroff picked up a copy of "The Baffled Parent's Guide to Coaching Youth Hockey." The advice proved invaluable.

Bruce Driver and Clare Wharton co-wrote the book, a primer for newcomers to the view from the bench. Driver clearly explains techniques and offers suggestions for instruction. Driver even discusses how to organize a team and run a practice, skills he picked up over the years but hadn't put into practice until March 2000.

Driver was talked into coaching by his dentist, Dr. Alan Krause of Montville. Krause was taking a Floyd Hall house league all-star team to a tournament, and needed an assistant.

Two practices, a handful of games, and a few months later, Driver was a full-fledged assistant on his son Dillon's first-ever team, again at Floyd Hall in Montclair. Morristown-Bear had launched his girls team at almost the same time, with Driver as an assistant and his daughter Whitney on the inaugural roster.

"I was helping coach a team when I'd never run a practice or anything before," said Driver, who will coach Dillon on the Morclair Blues Bartram A-Team this winter, as well as the Morristown-Bear girls. "It was kind of unique ... I jumped in with both feet."

The book is part of McGraw-Hill's series of Baffled Parent's Guides, which also includes lacrosse, baseball, softball, and ice hockey.



MORRISTOWN-BEAR GIRLS HOCKEY COACH BRUCE DRIVER GOES OVER A DRILL DURING A PRACTICE IN DECEMBER OF 2004. DRIVER'S BOOK, "THE BAFFLED PARENT'S GUIDE TO COACHING YOUTH HOCKEY," GIVES INSTRUCTION ON RUNNING PRACTICES AND EXPLAINS TECHNIQUES TO PARENTS INTERESTED IN COACHING.

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golf and basketball. As a result, Driver and Wharton had a template to follow.

Wharton, a Parsippany resident and freelance journalist, used interviews with Driver as a basis for the text portions. Driver drew up the drills himself based on what he'd used and observed over the years.

On the ice in Toronto at age 3, Driver soaked up hockey knowledge like a sponge. Driver honed that keen sense of the game at the University of Wisconsin and on the Canadian Olympic team in 1984. The smaller-than-average defenseman went on to a 14-year career in the National Hockey League, winning the Stanley Cup with the New Jersey Devils in 1995.

"My vision and anticipation, when I didn't care for the game all that much, he started every day at third, always barked cleanup and had to listen to his father scream from the dugout with every error and strikeout.

Even though I always vowed not to treat my son that way, I realized while coaching Haden that it didn't matter what I thought, only what his perception was.

He was the one that would hear it from his teammates if they thought he was receiving special treatment. He was the one that had to listen to me correct him. He was the one who was supposed to be having the time of his life.

Whatever Haden's reasons were, valid or invalid, he was enjoying himself more when I wasn't there... and I don't blame him. If my dad could hear the conversations my friends and I were having in the dugout, he might not be too happy. We weren't degenerate, but we weren't perfect either.

And sometimes, kids need to find themselves away from their parents, just like I did.

I've got a ton of baseball knowledge to offer my son, and he loves to hear me tell stories and teach him... at home. But when his friends are around, he just wants to be a kid without having to worry if he's listening to every word or critiquing every play.

Childhood goes by way too fast, and I just want to give my children every chance possible to be a kid before the real world comes calling. Maybe Haden will ask me to coach him again in the near future. I'd love to do it. But until that time comes, I'll just keep begging him to do his homework and clean his room and keep the "use two hands when you catch the ball" to the backyard.

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Dileo

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It was getting late and Coach wanted the game to be official, but first we had to finish our inning before the home team got its last Hicks. So to expedite the process, I was told to swing and miss... and make it look believable.

As my 10-year-old eyes swelled up with tears, I slowly walked to the plate without any usual swagger and excitement. The umpire asked if I was OK, and I said some sand was in my eye. I proceeded to be a good little soldier and followed orders.

I couldn't tell you if we won or lost that game. I'm sure Mr. P. could, however. And while that was traumatic for me, that was probably just the tip of the iceberg for his son.

You see, despite the fact that

Coaching

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The rainbow stripes tell each member of the family who has to be where, when, and for what, every day.

Yellow denotes Tom Wilson's high school team schedule — boys soccer in the fall and girls basketball in the winter — plus the many other area teams he works with. Son Jett gets blue, elder daughter Jocelyn is orange, younger Shannyn is pink. Even Wilson's wife, Susan, is green, usually for the twice-weekly practice sessions of her adult synchronized swimming team, which will compete in the national championships in October.

Nearly every day has something highlighted in yellow. Not only does Wilson coach the two high school teams he is involved with nearly all of his children's youth sports as well. That's three basketball teams, three travel soccer teams, and two softball teams.

Wilson steps up late many nights working on lesson plans. Dinner often becomes an afterthought.

"It works because I make it work," said Wilson, who often just switches Whippany Park fields when he goes from high school to youth soccer practice. "I enjoy doing it. I think there's times I don't do a good job, but I think there's more times that I do."

To coach, or watch

Sometimes even a dedicated coach like Wilson needs help. He has dozens of assistants who can run practice — or, occasionally, even coach games — in his absence. And serving as the head of certain leagues means he can schedule practices to minimize conflicts.

Dr. Joseph Nazarro spent a lot of time training assistant coaches for the Randolph youth lacrosse program he founded and still directs. He doesn't necessarily focus on the finer points of lacrosse, but rather who has "the unknown quantity that will decide whether you're going to be a good coach or not." It's a complex combination of interpersonal relationships, organizational skills, and sport knowledge. Difficult to determine without being on the sidelines, Nazarro said, "when you get out there on the field, you'll know."

Most area recreational sports teams need parent involvement to survive, whether those parents are on the sidelines, putting together programs, or

selling hot dogs and cocoa. Parents are frequently urged to coach, and most of those choose to work with their own kids.

Of the approximately 40 million American kids that are involved in sports, one in five is coached by a parent. Though the resulting family time is a plus for the parent and child involved, it may cause conflicts with the people around them.

"The common thread of sport can bring you closer," said Tim O'Donoghue, the head men's soccer coach at Stevens Institute of Technology in Hoboken. "I think my dad (Newton Hobsen, a former soccer coach Pat O'Donoghue did it right, not to put too much stock in making your kid a great athlete... On the field he was coach. Off the field, he was dad. He was able to do the best job he could to separate the two. Realistically, first and foremost I was his son."

Separating the two perspectives is the most difficult task most face on the sidelines.

"My son, unfortunately, hears me talk about the team 24 hours a day," said John Yachmetz, the coordinator of the Randolph Bulldogs football program for which his son, John David, plays. "I coach him in the car going home, and I coach him before the game, after the game, and when we're not with the team. He responds very well. He's a very enthusiastic sports-minded kid."

Even a professional, like Suzanne Sweeney, needed her captains to point out that she was tougher on Susie than other players. "They said it to me one time," she said. "They never had to say it to me again." Sweeney learned the line quickly, because, after all, the lessons are "in (Susie's) head enough since she was six."

Though Tom Wilson sometimes seems to be coaching every moment he's awake, he still remembers how to switch that persona off occasionally.

"He's not always the coach," said Jeff Wilson, who just finished eighth grade at Memorial Junior School. "He's a coach during the games and practices, but he's also a dad. At the games, he's more serious. When we're at home, he tells jokes."

When dad turns bad

Nazarro, the chairman of the Randolph Recreation Advisory Committee, recommends coaching your own child only until sixth grade. Beyond that point, the sport becomes more about competition and less the fun, every-body plays, cooperative environment

found at the rec level. Each player must develop his or her role in a team context, not an individual one. And in a me-first society, that sometimes spells trouble.

"Kids at that stage of the game want to get away from Daddy and want to experience something with another coach," said Nazarro, who coached football, wrestling and lacrosse at Hanover Park in the 1980s, and also served as a graduate assistant in football and lacrosse at Rutgers. "It's hard for fathers to see beyond that. I did that with both my sons, ended up coaching your own kid. It's just impossible, as much as you try."

Bruce and his daughter Whitney Driver both brought up the same incident when asked about the trouble with having a parent as coach. "The younger driver, a captain on the Morristown-Bear girls ice hockey team, had been dashing around the Twin Oaks rink trying to find enough locker room space for her teammates. As a result, she and a half-dozen other girls were late for practice. Bruce Driver, the Colonials' head coach, had established a rule that latecomers had to skate sprints — but only the day before, according to daughter Whitney.

When Whitney protested — and things escalated into what she described as "a huge screaming fit" — her coach-dad asked her to leave the ice. "It was not her father, she would've skated," Bruce Driver recalled. "Because I was her father, she decided she was going to dig in her heels. She understood from there she had to deal with me as the coach, and not the father."

Though Driver, a 14-year NHL veteran, hadn't had much coaching experience before taking over at Morristown-Bear's fledgling girls ice hockey program, he knew he couldn't play favorites — especially not when his own daughter was involved.

"It was hard because you're looking at your coach, and they're your coach, but they're your parents at the same time," said Whitney Driver, who also played softball for her mother, Tracy, from fifth grade through high school. "I hit me my senior year when I took a step back. I thought, 'He's right. I'm being so hard on him right now...'"

Sometimes Susie Sweeney didn't understand why her mom was so tough. But as she grew up, she learned the coach "pushed me to the limit," yet remained her biggest cheerleader at home. All the extra shots her father,

played, were huge attributes for me," said Driver, who now lives in Montville. "I have good attention to detail, and I knew I could handle teaching kids."

Beginning with an introduction to the sport itself, the book explains how to organize a team, run a practice, and even proper behavior for coaches. There is also a chapter focusing on gender issues, which is particularly important since many ice hockey teams are coed.

Area hockey fans may recognize Alex Smigalski of Mountain Lakes in many of the technique photos — he's the one in the Delbarton jersey — in addition to the Morristown-Bear girls and 13-year-old Dillon Driver.

The second half of the book is dedicated to dozens of detailed diagrams of weren't perfect either.

We were kids.

And sometimes, kids need to find themselves away from their parents, just like I did.

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Childhood goes by way too fast, and I just want to give my children every chance possible to be a kid before the real world comes calling. Maybe Haden will ask me to coach him again in the near future. I'd love to do it. But until that time comes, I'll just keep begging him to do his homework and clean his room and keep the "use two hands when you catch the ball" to the backyard.

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Hofmann

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And if the leagues didn't exist the way they do nowadays... well, I shudder to think what no organized leagues would do to our children.

Take my kids, for example. When I used to get home from school, I'd grab a bite to eat and head out to the schoolyard two doors away and meet the same 9-10 guys every day. We'd play football, stickball or full-court basketball — whatever was in season — hierarchically for hours.

Now? Kids would get home and head right to the video games or SpongeBob SquarePants. For whatever reason, the days of meeting a group of kids at a nearby playground or park are over.

Something has to get the kids out of the house and that is organized sports. I have been blessed with two kids who want to be out on the field. I seldom have to drag them out of the house to play.

But I truly wonder what would happen without the organized leagues.

The time we share is awesome. I have shared advice, instructions and knowledge from the days when I played. We have shared wins and losses, good games and bad. We have laughed and cried together. Games or practices have become the highlights of my week. Watching a kid develop whether it is one of mine or not — has become an absolute delight.

It is also neat to see kids' friendships develop over time. When my oldest son Joseph first went out for tee-ball, he didn't know a soul. None of his teammates knew each other. But after a week or two, they were cheering each other on, helping each other, and becoming friends. Same thing with my second son, Mike.

Sports at the youth level is a beautiful thing — and coaching makes it possible to be right there in the mix with your kids. I know there are kooky coaches out there who berate kids, umpires and/or parents on the youth sports level. And I have had my run-ins with wacko parents, but the crazies are few and far between. And when things run smoothly (as is most often the case, by far), life can't get any better.

Believe me when I tell you, coaching youth sports is a pleasure. I believe in coaching firmly but with kindness and respect. And I never, ever put my kids first at the expense of others. Deep down, I'd be lying to you if I said I pulled for others as much as my kids. Any coach would be lying if they told you otherwise.

My goal when the season is over is this: If someone completely unfamiliar with my team sat in the bleachers for the entire season, he shouldn't be able to tell who my two sons are.

Coaching youth sports is not all about wins and losses. When you get to a certain age — maybe 9 or 10 years old — winning does become more important.

Anyone who tells you otherwise either doesn't have kids or just doesn't get it. Kids at the age of 5 or 6 don't know the score and could hardly keep count themselves. They like to wear the uniform and are in it for the fun of the game. A few years later, they are keeping score and they want to win.

But winning games isn't the only thing a youth coach is responsible for. If a kid stands his helmet and the coach doesn't discipline that sort of behavior, he is not doing his job as a coach. If a kid tannos or hogs it and the coach doesn't step in, the coach isn't doing his job. If a coach doesn't teach in the attitude area, he is missing the mark.

It is his job to instruct his players in all areas. Kids want to be coached.

And if the father is the one doing the coaching, hats off to him!

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