

Vision Statement

In March 2000, 50 youth sports leaders came together at the first annual Against the Grain Forum convened by Positive Coaching Alliance based at Stanford University and the Center for Sport, Character & Culture at the University of Notre Dame. This statement emerged from that event.

A Vision of a Positive Youth Sports Culture

We talk to one another and nod our heads and say that we need to create a positive culture around youth sports, but what do we really mean? Before we can take steps toward it, we must clearly define “a positive culture in youth sports.”

What a Positive Culture Looks Like

Bottom line, we want to create a culture where kids love to play the game. They look forward to practices and games as times when they will have fun. The joy they find in playing will last a lifetime.

In a positive youth sports culture, all resources do not flow to the elite level. Athletes have options determined by their ability and interest. Elite athletes compete in “meritocratic” environments in which a place on the team and playing time are determined by ability, performance and effort. Less talented or skilled athletes, or simply athletes who want a different kind of experience, have the option to play in developmental or recreational programs in which they are guaranteed the right to play at least a part of every game.

At every level, players are proud to have their families and friends see them play. Knowing that they are an important part of the team contributes to this proud feeling; their coaches are supportive and do not embarrass them in front of those watching; they are confident that their parents are supportive and will not confront the officials over questionable calls; and ultimately, they know that those watching are proud of them whether or not they win the game.

All involved in youth sports (players, coaches, parents, officials, and fans) realize what a special time this is. They look at their involvement as a privilege that they never want to dishonor. They realize that sports provide a time when they get to interact with people they do not see on a regular basis, and they come to cherish this time. Players know that this is a time when they can learn from each other (as well as from the coach), and the coach sees how much can be learned from the players. Players look forward to playing challenging opponents because they push them to perform to their highest potential.

Coaches feel the responsibility not only to teach their players the skills and strategy behind the game, but also a respect for the tradition of the game and for all who are involved (teammates, opponents, officials, and fans). Learning to honor the game contributes to a growing sense of responsibility and maturing moral reasoning that helps athletes prepare to become contributing citizens of the larger community.

Vision Statement, continued

Coaches realize that what they are teaching their players carries far beyond the field into the classroom, the home, and even into future jobs. Coaches have their players (and team as a whole) focus on their effort and personal improvement, rather than simply on the results of the game. They help players recognize that mistakes are an inevitable and important part of the learning process and that a key to success is being able to rebound from mistakes with renewed determination. This way, players gain a sense of control over their own development and confidence in their ability to succeed, in life as well as in sports.

Players have an important voice in creating this positive culture, and there are multiple and ongoing opportunities for them to shape their own environment. During team discussions players speak and contribute. When decisions are being made that affect the entire team/league, coaches and league organizers make a concerted effort to be approachable and players' ideas are sought out and considered. Having this voice increases players' sense of internal motivation, and they feel a stronger sense of control over their surroundings.

This positive culture encourages athletes to play multiple sports and never pressures players to specialize in one sport too early in their careers. Coaches resist the urge to pressure their players to give up other sports besides their own, realizing that what might give them the best winning percentage is not always the same as what is in their players' best interest.

The Challenge

When a game is on the line, can we really live up to this description of a positive culture? Can we really expect coaches, players, fans, and parents to uphold this positive culture if it might result in losing the game? The answer has to be, "Yes!" All involved must realize that winning cannot be the only goal. Maintaining a positive culture where positive character traits are developed in our players must come first. When the game is on the line and tensions are running high, it can take a high level of moral courage to keep our focus on what is really important, but if we can do that, we will teach our children an invaluable lesson. We must believe that maintaining this positive culture is so vital that we are willing to stand up to others that are putting it in danger. Our vision needs to stretch far beyond winning a specific game to making a lasting impact on the lives of our players.