



## THE MENTUS GAME

with Ron Mentus, RLM Athletics

# character

**The issue of character - or lack of same - has become a disturbing element in the sporting world, and much of society as well. Athletes, coaches, parents and fans in general seem to ignore even the most basic tenets of character. All that seems to matter in athletics, unfortunately, are the results which the scoreboard reveals. And should those results not be to our liking, character flies out the window.**

In virtually all of my engagements in which I conduct clinics and seminars on character (and sportsmanship), my audience will hear this admonishment: "Don't be a character—show some!"

The definition of character is rather simple: "A distinguishing feature or attribute; moral or ethical structure of a person; integrity, moral strength, self-discipline and self-control." But as simple as it seems, too many of us don't grasp its importance.

On several of the above, many of our athletes and coaches appear not to have one iota of understanding of those characteristics. "Character? I don't know (or care) about character, just win the game is all that matters." Fundamentally, character is just doing the right thing. Shouldn't "doing the right thing" be the focal point of all of our endeavors?

The recent Little League World Series brought to my attention a subject which I feel reveals the lack of character displayed by too many coaches. A newspaper account noted that a winning pitcher in one game relied strongly on his curveball. The youngster praised his catcher for often calling for the curveball. Curveballs? These are youngsters in the 11 to 13 age bracket. And the head coach, whose son was the catcher, approved of the pitch-calling.

Throwing curves by youngsters with tender and still developing arms is not a practice which should be employed, nor sanctioned, by coaches. In this instance, would it have not shown more character—or wisdom—had this coach instructed his pitcher not to throw curveballs? Shouldn't any coach be concerned with a young pitcher's future, rather than subject him to the risk of arm or shoulder injuries? Apparently not, so long as winning remains the ultimate goal.

"I'm not a fan of these young pitchers throwing curveballs," said Sean Fesh, a 17-year professional, who also is a youth pitching instructor. "I think a lot of these coaches have such big egos that they don't care about the long term effects. They just want to win now." Sadly, that says it all in a nutshell.

The medical community has long advocated restrictions or limits to be placed upon young hurlers. Dr. Paul G. Donohue writes a syndicated column in which he provides his answers (or opinions) to questions posed by readers. Following are excerpts of his response to a grandmother who was concerned about her grandson's arm pains.

"Young baseball pitchers are prone to developing throwing-arm injuries," wrote Donohue. "Their bones are not fully mature. Sections of immature bone are growth plates, areas that have not yet turned into bone. Growth plates permit the bone to grow."

A few years ago, Little League adopted rules pertaining to the number of pitches thrown, and the necessary rest mandated between subsequent pitching activities. This is all well and good. But of course, it does not address the kinds of pitches thrown. So if there are no rules preventing curveballs, why not take advantage of their supposed effectiveness?

But here the character issue, in my view, should be first and foremost. Knowing that such types of pitches can be harmful to youngsters, a coach should set a good example and instruct his hurlers not to throw them. Winning the game is one thing; but doing the right thing is even more vital. It would serve as a beacon of character, to young athletes and other coaches, that doing the right thing ranks a notch above winning at any cost.

## THE MENTUS GAME

Dr. Donohue added, "Stress on growth plates can lead to Little League elbow, which encompasses a number of conditions, (such as) fragmentation of bone and elements of the growth plate caused by excessive stress."

There are many in the athletic community who believe that any type of pitch is acceptable, if thrown with proper mechanics. Sure, there are always exceptions. Smoking has been proven to be harmful to health, yet not everyone is stricken with cancer as a result. But smoking is still not a good idea by any stretch of the imagination. Neither is it sound to have youngsters throwing curveballs. There's too much medical evidence which points to its ultimate physical hazards.

One coach recalled his younger days, when he threw curveballs at age nine and beyond. After his high school career had ended, "...my shoulder and elbow began to give me problems. At age 47, I have a hard time lifting anything over my right shoulder. I can still throw, but the elbow hurts for days afterward." Where was the coach with the character to warn that pitcher of the ills of curveballs at a young age?

Lindsay Barton, in an online post for MomsTeam.com, said in part, "Pitch counts are one

imperfect way to keep baseball as child-centered, as safety-conscious as we can in a youth sports culture...A baseball culture that is always treating kids as mini-adults, as paid professionals playing not for their own enjoyment...but for the enjoyment of the adults running the show."

The popular thing is not always the right thing, nor does it always showcase good or proper character. But in too many instances, that attitude rules the day...or the playing of a baseball game.

Do we need youngsters emulating some of the antics of professionals, whose behavior (or language) often shows no responsibility towards sportsmanship or character? Emphatically, I maintain we do not. But until we coaches (and adults) stand up for solid character and appropriate decorum, youngsters get the idea that almost any kind of behavior or conduct is acceptable.

When it comes to pitching, what youngster doesn't want to be the next C.C. Sabathia of the Yankees, or the Cardinals' Adam Wainwright, or David Price of Tampa Bay or the Giants' Tim Lincecum? In due time, perhaps. But not until their arms have been properly tuned and developed.

By all means, play the game to win. That's why we keep score. But do so by allowing youngsters to develop their arms (and other skills) at a reasonable rate. Don't push them to try and perform above their means or to satisfy the coach's desire to field a championship team...no matter the cost.

Do the right thing: show some character!

**Ron Mentus was awarded Collegiate Baseball's Sportsmanship Award in 2002. He is available to conduct seminars/clinics and accept speaking engagements on**



**the topics of sportsmanship and character. Contact him at: 203-740-7986 or [rlmathletics@aol.com](mailto:rlmathletics@aol.com). RLM Athletics is located in Brookfield, CT.**