

## Chapter 1

# Teaching Lacrosse to Children

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### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Preparing to coach lacrosse
  - ▶ Taking the field with your team
  - ▶ Coaching your own child
  - ▶ Dealing with problems
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**C**ongratulations on stepping forward to coach a youth lacrosse team this season! Few endeavors are more rewarding than working with children and helping them develop skills, as well as grow as individuals. If you happen to be picking up this book because you haven't decided yet whether you want the job, we hope that the information we present here convinces you that coaching can be one of the most rewarding experiences of your life — as long as you do it for the right reasons. Heading into the season, your goals should center on fun, skill development, and safety.

A volunteer lacrosse coach assumes a very important role. The way you approach the season, interact with the kids, and get along with their parents goes a long way toward determining whether your players embrace the sport and play it for years to come or put away their sticks for good.

To get your season headed in the right direction and finish it strong, you simply need some quality information, which begins here and runs throughout the book. In the following pages, you find everything you need to propel your players through a safe, fun-filled season that they'll remember fondly for years to come.

## *Recognizing Your Behind-the-Scenes Responsibilities*

Before you go on a job interview, you research the company to find out everything you can to help you land the position. The same approach applies to coaching lacrosse. Before your players strap on their helmets and take the

field, you have to fulfill lots of behind-the-scenes responsibilities to get the season off to a smooth start. So whatever your reasons for volunteering — simply because your daughter is on the team, or because you love lacrosse and want to share your knowledge and enthusiasm with others — be aware that you've accepted an enormous responsibility that you should never take lightly.

## *Working with your players' parents*

One of the most interesting aspects of coaching youth lacrosse — and also one of the most challenging — is working with the players' parents. Most of the parents you'll come into contact with are wonderful, supportive, caring people who naturally want the best for their kids; they may even turn out to be great assets to you as assistant coaches. (Check out Chapter 4 for details on choosing assistants.)

But any time you're dealing with a group of adults in an organized sports setting, of course, some of them can end up being sources of season-long aggravation. If you're not prepared to handle situations involving parents quickly and efficiently, some parents can become distractions and can detract from the kids' enjoyment. They can also have you reaching for the aspirin bottle.

### *Teaming up with parents*

Just as you can dodge an opponent on the lacrosse field, you can sidestep many potential parent problems by gathering all the parents together before you begin working with their kids, laying the ground rules on what you expect in terms of behavior during games, and outlining parental roles and responsibilities. Turn to Chapter 4 for details on how to conduct one of these parent meetings.

Throughout the season, you'll be stressing to your players the importance of teamwork. You really won't do anything different when it comes to the parents. When coaches and parents find ways to work together — the adult form of teamwork — they create a special atmosphere that produces tremendous benefits for everyone, especially the youngsters. Conversely, when coaches and parents clash on everything from playing-time issues to the positioning of players to game-day strategy, they spoil the lacrosse experience for everyone involved. These types of disagreements smother the kids' fun, turning practices and games into activities that they dread instead of look forward to.



Parents play important roles in youth lacrosse programs. Working with them, rather than against them, can have a positive impact on the season.

### *Keeping parents involved*

Keep the following in mind to make your dealings with parents go smoothly:



- ✓ **Take a proactive approach.** Before that first face-off drill in practice, let parents know what your expectations are — not just for their kids, but for them as well. Explain your coaching methods to them. Detail what you want both players and parents to take away from their experience. Painting a clear picture leaves little room for those dreaded misunderstandings that often develop into major problems.

This season may be some parents' first experience having a child in an organized sports program, so any information you can share to help them navigate this unfamiliar territory will be greatly appreciated.

Telling parents firsthand that you're committed to skill development over winning and that you adhere to the league's equal-playing-time rule helps reduce the chance that a parent will confront you in the middle of the season about how many minutes Junior is receiving on the field on game day. Failing to clarify these issues for parents well in advance opens the door to more problems than you can ever imagine — and you'll get them, too. Chapter 2 helps you develop that all-important coaching philosophy and understand all your league's policies and rules so that you can communicate this information clearly to parents.

- ✓ **Find different ways to include them.** Parents invest a lot of time in the season by driving their kids to practices and games; they also fork over a lot of money to purchase equipment, uniforms, and even occasional postgame treats for the team. The season will be much more enjoyable for them and their youngsters — and you'll be making a wonderful gesture — if you find ways to include them in the team's season-long journey. Get parents involved at practices, for example, and recruit the right ones to assist on game day. Chapter 4 gives you a variety of tips on boosting parental involvement.
- ✓ **Keep communication lines open.** Conducting a preseason parents' meeting (covered in Chapter 4) is the first step toward establishing a strong foundation with your players' parents, but you've got to keep communication lines open all season long. Be sure to find time at different junctures during the season to talk to the parents about their children's progress. Parents enjoy hearing about those areas of the game in which their child is really excelling. Also, any time a child encounters some difficulty in picking up a skill you are teaching in practice, suggest something the parents can do to help their child at home — but only if the youngster is interested. You never want to force a player to practice more at home if he or she isn't enthusiastic about it.

You can check in with parents from time to time by having a quick casual chat before or after practice, just to make sure that everything is going well and that their child is having fun playing for you. Including parents in all facets of the season is the right thing to do, the smart thing to do, and one of the most effective ways to ensure that children have a positive experience playing lacrosse.



Regardless of what you do to include parents and make them feel that they're valuable parts of the season, a problem may still arise. No matter what the nature of the issue is, you must remain grounded, calm, and in control of your emotions. In Chapter 18, we cover some of the most common problems that lacrosse coaches are forced to address and offer the best approaches for solving them before they have a chance to affect the season.

## *Getting a handle on rules and terms*

It's no secret that teaching your players offensive and defensive skills is one of your biggest responsibilities as a lacrosse coach, but it's certainly not your only one. You also must go over other aspects of the game that will impact the kids' enjoyment level. The more you know and understand about the game — rules, terms, and (at the advanced levels) strategy — and the better you can explain them to your team, the more enjoyable the experience will be for them and for you. The process isn't as complicated as it may seem, but you need to put in some time and effort to learn the rules, including some of the stranger ones that you may not be familiar with — such as the proper way to execute a check (in some boys' leagues) without being whistled for a penalty or how many players you are allowed to have across the midfield line when your team has the ball and is on the attack.

In Chapter 3, we open the rule book and describe everything from terminology to penalties. Throughout Parts II, III, and IV, we also focus on providing you a detailed rundown of the skills, techniques, and strategies that you need to pass on to your players. We've got you covered if you need a refresher on some of the fundamental skills to teach a beginning team, and we provide more-detailed information if you're coaching an older squad that has been attacking and defending for several seasons.



Often, leagues modify rules to fit players' ages and experience levels, and you need to be aware of all these changes so that you can alert your players. Everything from the size of the field to what types of rules are enforced changes from community to community. Knowing these rules — and being able to share them — makes a tremendous difference in your players' enjoyment of playing lacrosse.

## *Stepping onto the Field*

Seeing kids running up and down the field with smiles on their faces, watching them learn new skills and improve on others, and observing them as they develop a love of lacrosse make all those hours you volunteer worthwhile. During your time with the kids, both in practices and on game day, what

you say to them and how you go about saying it have a significant impact on their experience. Based on your interactions with your players, you wield the power to fuel their passion for playing the game or drive them away in disappointment.

## *Planning and executing practices*

Game day is what young lacrosse players look forward to most, but the bulk of their skill development takes place during practices, so you need to design quality practices and use drills that meet all the kids' needs and allow them to see improvement in their play. Well-planned practices pay big dividends in fun and player development, whereas those that are simply thrown together in a couple of minutes squash the team's potential.

To make each practice productive, keep the following tips in mind:



- ✓ **Use your position to shape lives.** Be aware that your impact on your players' lives can extend far beyond showing them how to execute various offensive and defensive skills. Your position allows you to make a significant difference in many other areas, and you should take full advantage of the opportunity. During practices, devote time to discussing the importance of staying away from tobacco, alcohol, and drugs and the ways they can harm the body. Stress the importance of players' doing their best in school so that they can lead productive lives as adults. Talk about getting exercise and eating healthy food to help prevent future health issues, too.

While the kids are stretching is a great time to talk about topics besides lacrosse that can have a significant impact on their lives.

- ✓ **Make the setting fun.** The most effective practices are conducted in an enjoyable atmosphere in which fun is emphasized and mistakes (such as dropping a pass) aren't viewed as catastrophic. Let the kids know at the first practice of the season that mistakes are part of playing lacrosse and that everyone will make them during the season. Be sure to get across to them that all you ask is that they listen to your instructions and give their all during practices and games. Kids who know that they can make mistakes without being humiliated or yanked out of the game will be much more relaxed on the field and will have much more fun. A relaxed atmosphere also helps the kids pick up skills faster and learn more aspects of the game.
- ✓ **Be creative.** When you're putting together drills, look for clever ways to enhance the fun. Visualize going through the drill, and ask yourself what would make it more interesting. Challenge yourself to run practices that the kids can't wait to get to. You want your players to have so much fun at practice that they hate it when the session comes to a close.



When you're putting together your practice plan, go with those drills that keep the kids on the move and that match their skill level. Drills that force kids to stand in line or spend more time watching than participating kill energy levels, as well as sabotage learning, development, and that all-important fun factor. We provide an array of drills that cover all areas of the game — and that are designed for all skill levels — in Chapters 7 and 14.

## *Handling game-day duties*

Coaching a youth lacrosse team on game day is all about being prepared, adapting to ever-changing situations, and providing a constant source of positive motivation. You have to make a wide range of decisions, often with little time to think about them and while juggling other issues. You have pregame, halftime, and postgame talks to deliver; playing time to monitor; substitutions to make; and strategies to employ. Yes, game day brings a lengthy list of responsibilities, but you don't need to lose any sleep over it. In Chapter 8, you find all you need to help your game day go smoothly so that you won't spend your nights tossing and turning.



Game day provides more than just an opportunity for your players to use the skills they've been working on in practice. It also allows you to get across some other important points, such as working as a team, displaying good sportsmanship toward opponents and officials, abiding by the rules, doing your best at all times — and having fun regardless of the numbers on the scoreboard.

## *Juggling the Dual Roles of Coach and Parent*

If you're a parent, you certainly don't need us to tell you that you already have one of the most challenging jobs around. What we can share with you, though, is that handling the dual role of parenting and coaching your child in lacrosse can present unique challenges, some of which you may not expect. When you and your child step onto the field, new issues can materialize; preparing yourself to handle them can help pave the way to an enormously rewarding and memorable season for both of you.

If you and your child agree that it's a good move for you to coach the team, rely on the following tips to help ensure that the experience is problem free:

- ✓ **Put parenting first.** Regardless of what happens on the field during a practice or game, you're a parent first and foremost. If the team performed poorly, don't monopolize your child's time at home by dissecting everything that unfolded. Leave the coaching at the field; focus on being a supportive, caring parent.

- ✓ **Maintain open communication.** Your child must understand that he can come to you with a problem at any time, just as you want any of the other players to do if something is on their minds. Just because you're the coach doesn't mean that certain topics are off limits.
- ✓ **Ditch the extra repetitions.** Sometimes, your child may have difficulty grasping a particular skill during practice or may struggle during a game. The natural tendency is to work with her at home, giving her some extra repetitions. This territory is dangerous, however, so proceed cautiously. Refrain from pushing the child to practice more. It's OK to ask casually whether she'd like to spend a little extra time working on a certain skill at home. If so, great; if not, let the situation go. Pushing your child to perform extra repetitions can drain her interest in the sport and make her feel inferior to some of her teammates.
- ✓ **Chuck the comparisons.** Never burden a child with expectations that he should perform as well as his brothers or sisters who are involved in lacrosse or who played it in the past. Let your child develop at his own rate. Comparing kids can result in problems that are difficult to repair, such as crushed confidence, low self esteem, and lack of interest in future participation.
- ✓ **Pile on the praise.** Kids can have a tough time when their parent is a coach, because they have to adjust to sharing Mom or Dad with a group of other children, so be sure to praise your child's willingness, understanding, and cooperation in this special venture. Coaching your child can be one of the most rewarding experiences you'll ever have, but it isn't always easy.
- ✓ **Find the proper balance.** Make sure that your behavior falls between providing preferential treatment and overcompensating to avert the perception that you're giving your child special treatment. You want to be careful that you don't give your child extra playing time and attention without even being aware of it. But you also want to exercise great caution that you don't go to unfair lengths to *reduce* your child's playing time or give her *less* attention or instruction during practices because you don't want other parents to think that you're favoring your child.



As a parent, you naturally want your child to excel on the lacrosse field. Just don't allow yourself to view your coaching position as an opportunity to control your child's destiny and help secure a college scholarship for him. Entering the season with those types of thoughts will likely lead you to put unwanted pressure on the child and push him harder than you do the other kids. If you lose sight of what youth lacrosse is all about, you may create problems that affect not just his interest in lacrosse, but also his emotional well being.

## *Preparing for All Kinds of Obstacles*

Being a youth lacrosse coach requires more than just the ability to teach passing techniques and the proper way to scoop up a loose ball. It also takes being prepared and knowing how to handle the many unique challenges that have the potential to appear throughout the season. Following are two of your greatest coaching challenges:

- ✓ **Meeting the needs of all the players.** Working with all the different types of kids you'll find on your roster — ranging from the shy and clumsy to the nonstop talkers and the athletically gifted — will keep you on your toes. Sure, the smorgasbord of personalities will test your patience, communication skills, and ability to meet each player's constantly changing needs, but you're up to the task. To help you along, Chapter 13 offers some great advice on refining your coaching strategies as the season unfolds to ensure that each youngster gets the most out of her experience under your guidance.
- ✓ **Maintaining a safe environment.** One of your top priorities is keeping the kids as safe as possible every time they take the field for practices and games. Although protecting the players completely and eliminating all types of injuries is impossible, you can take steps that significantly reduce the risk of injuries, as well as their severity. You can accomplish this goal by teaching only proper and safe techniques, being prepared for emergency situations, and knowing how to handle any emergencies that do take place. Chapter 17 provides tips and advice for keeping kids safe.



Any time you take the field for a practice or game, be sure to have a properly stocked first-aid kit on hand. In Chapter 17, we cover what your kit should include.