

The Matheny Manifesto: A Young Manager's Old-School Views on Success in Sports and Life (Matheny, Mike)

It works best for all of us if you would plan on turning your kid over to me and the assistant coaches when you drop him off and entrust him to us for the two hours or so that we have scheduled for a game or practice. I want him to take responsibility for his own water, not have you running to the concession stand or standing behind the dugout asking if he's thirsty or hungry or hot—and I'd appreciate if you would share this information with other guests, like grandparents.

I know times have changed, but one of the greatest lessons my father taught me was that my coach was always right—even when he was wrong. That principle is a great life lesson about how things really work. Our culture has lost respect for authority, because kids hear their parents complain about teachers and coaches. That said, I'm determined to exhibit enough humility to come to your son and apologize if I've treated him wrong. Meanwhile, give me the benefit of the doubt that I have his best interests in mind, even if you're convinced I'm wrong.

Who wants to be told they're doing something wrong, especially when it comes to their kids? For all I knew, they would take me up on my offer to forget this whole idea, and I would be the one in the stands who had dropped his kid off to play ball.

I want to tell you how I arrived at the philosophy I espouse today, and I also want to assure you that I in no way claim it originated with me. Its values are as old as the Bible, and it's entirely opposite of the me-first youth culture the media tries to sell our kids twenty-four hours a day on screens as small as their pockets and as big as their bedroom walls.

When I was a kid, we loved sports. We played baseball, basketball, and football because they were fun and we enjoyed them. Organized sports were great, but most of the time we played on our own. Hall of Fame pitcher Nolan Ryan has said that the difference between the way kids play today and the way he and his friends played is that now they only play with uniforms on.

Somehow, the more organized sports became, the more they became about the parents and not about the kids. All of a sudden, kids didn't seem to love sports as much as I did when I was their age—and that's something I thought needed to change.

Some didn't. Some couldn't. Some had to go. There were those who had to be dismissed. Others were happy to leave a program where we put less emphasis on winning, refused to dominate other teams, and purposely moved players around in what appeared to be nonsensical lineups. Plus, we didn't travel far, didn't allow swaggering, and insisted on good sportsmanship and class. Except for those who left, plenty of people were impressed. Hillerich & Bradsby, the makers of

It's usually more of a blow to the parents' pride than the kid's. We say, "If it's not the perfect fit, why waste your time? If our structure or our style is causing issues, whether at home or within your family, or you're having second thoughts about why you got into this—if anything about it is less than positive, go find positive.

Clearly we were onto something that was working. So why was I conflicted? Because I didn't want to be guilty of the very thing we were trying to avoid: coming off like I thought I had all the answers. On the other hand, I don't want to sway an inch from my contention that youth sports are screwed up and parents are to blame. I stand behind that 100 percent, and I can't be wishy-washy about it.

Watching their kids play sports becomes many parents' primary activity. Other parents become their main social group and their entire identity begins to revolve around their kids. All of a sudden, whether or not their kid makes the team can become almost as important as whether Dad or Mom keeps their job.

It's great to be proud of your kids, but it can be dangerous when that pride comes to define you as a person.

If you're cheerful and upbeat when he's doing well but despondent and grumpy when he's not, beware. If you treat him great when he succeeds but act as if he has let you down when he's failed, don't be surprised

when he decides, “I’m done, I’m out. You treat me better when I’m not playing sports.”

Then comes the inevitable slump, or the player just settles back into his realistic performance level. He’s still a quality ballplayer, still a big leaguer, still a professional. But because he’s not the standout he was last week or last month, he doesn’t get the same attention from anyone anymore, including his manager. Manager, boss, parent—whoever treats a player, a subordinate, or a kid that way is exhibiting a simple, shallow character trait: conditional love. And I don’t know one recipient of it who can’t see right through it.

Then you get those parents who rationalize by saying, “If I quit yelling at them, that means I don’t care about them anymore.” Meanwhile, the kid is thinking, Please stop caring.

Naturally, a lot of kids see the yelling as their parents taking their frustration out on them. Regardless how young they are, they know a lack of self-control when they see it. Then, when the kids make errors or strike out or miss a basket or let a soccer goal dribble through and then express their anger by throwing equipment or cussing—because everyone else is doing it—they get in trouble. They get benched.

IMAGINE YOURSELF IN the most stressful situation possible, with all your family and friends watching. Imagine being asked to do something so difficult that most people fail three times more often than they succeed. Now imagine that the people you love most in the world are screaming at the top of their lungs at you while you’re trying to do this. Sound tough? Welcome to the world of youth sports.

What struck our team parents most was the idea that we were taking the pressure off them to perform. Many parents felt they needed to show their kid how crazy they were about him by how crazy they went in the stands. But the truth is, it’s completely the opposite.

I told the parents in the letter to just clap because—and this is coming from kids—it actually adds more pressure when they hear their parents even yell, “You can do this!” It’s not encouraging. It actually adds stress! Here’s why:

But when, on top of all that, he has this extra so-called encouragement coming from people who are supposed to care, regardless whether he succeeds or not, it's just too much. The parents, naturally, are trying so hard to help him succeed and think they are boosting his confidence by saying, "You can do this!" But then what if he doesn't succeed? He's already crushed because he has let down himself and his team and his coaches. But now you, too? My parents thought I could do it, and I couldn't. Many kids just break and say, "Forget it."

He has the rest of his life to learn about real pressure and disappointment. Let him have fun. You'll be amazed by how much more enjoyable the game will be for you when you take the pressure off yourself to be the world's best cheerleader—and be just a spectator and fan of your child doing something that he loves. You'll be glad you did. Your child will, too.

If your answer has anything to do with you, it's time to reconsider your motives. You may need to find someone to take your place. Believe me, I know, coaching youth sports is a thankless job. There's always more grief than joy. But more long-term damage can be done to kids than to you if you're coaching for the wrong reasons.

We've been given the rare privilege and heavy responsibility of influencing young people on a daily basis, for better or for worse, for the rest of their lives. Which direction will you lead your kids today?

People who thought we would have fancy uniforms and shoes and gloves and bat bags were sorely disappointed to find that all we invested in were different-colored silk-screened T-shirts (one for home games, another for road games). We said we were emphasizing other things, and we meant it.

When your aim is character and class over glamour and style, it doesn't seem cool. At least at first. And that can drive some people nuts. They get impatient waiting for some evidence of success.

Finding and grooming that one in a million was not our primary goal. We hoped to maximize the ability of every player we had.

I run spring training in the big leagues the same way. We don't waste time. My goal is to have something for every person to do every minute they are on the field. We don't need six hours if we have clear objectives.

We asked for their input on these topics and assured them our aim was not to parent their children but to be another adult voice, trying to promote the qualities we all believe are important for our next generation to develop. It was interesting to see the kids slowly

“You're never as bad as they say you are when things are going bad, and you're never as good as they say you are when things are going well.”

“I was taught to respect the umpires on my youth-league baseball team and to shake their hands after every game.” You can imagine how gratifying it was to hear that story.

I asked one, who had served with multiple different SEAL teams as both a leader and an instructor, what were the characteristics he commonly saw in those who made it through the process and were selected. He listed the following five: 1. Physical toughness (“The easiest quality to find,” he said.) 2. Mental toughness 3. Moral toughness (He described this as “Doing the right thing all the time, even when nobody's looking.”) 4. Team orientation (“A belief that the needs of the team are greater than your own.”) 5. Humility

The bigger picture is teaching a person to put on his big-boy pants and learn to handle failure.

I suggested they play catch with their child, hit him grounders and pop flies—just as my dad did with me. To develop skills, the younger player needs repetition. For life in general, he needs time with his parents. It's a win-win. The temptation these days is to consider it a huge victory to get kids out of the house, off their computers, away from their smartphones, out from in front of any screen long enough to do what we did when we were kids—just play.

It's time for someone to make a tough decision. It's hard for a coach to show enough character to tell a star's parents their child should play at a higher level, but it's the right thing to do.

Wooden believed true success ought to be tied not to achievement, wealth, or fame but to how close a person came to their potential. He wanted his students to see success not in terms of results but in terms of effort.

JOHN WOODEN'S MAXIMS ON TIME • Be quick, but don't hurry. • If you don't have time to do it right, when will you find the time to do it over? • Good things take time, as they should. We shouldn't expect good things to happen overnight. Getting something too easily or too soon can cheapen the outcome. • Don't let yesterday take up too much of today. • Time lost is lost forever. People tell themselves they will work twice as hard tomorrow to make up for what they did not do today. People should always do their best. If they work twice as hard tomorrow, then they should have also worked twice as hard today. That would have been their best. ON PUTTING OTHERS FIRST • Seek opportunities to show you care. The smallest gestures often make the biggest difference. • Be more concerned with what you can do for others than what others can do for you. You'll be surprised at the results. • You cannot live a perfect day without doing something for another without thought of something in return. • Happiness begins where selfishness ends. • Sincerity may not help us make friends, but it will help us keep them. • We can give without loving, but we can't love without giving. In fact, love is nothing unless we give it to someone. ON PERSONAL GROWTH • Many athletes have tremendous God-given gifts, but they don't focus on the development of those gifts. Who are they? You've never heard of them, and you never will. It's true in sports, and it's true in life. • If you keep too busy learning the tricks of the trade, you may never learn the trade. • The more concerned we become over the things we can't control, the less we will do with the things we can control. • Perfection is what you are striving for, but perfection is an impossibility. However, striving for perfection is not an impossibility. • The best competition I have is against myself to become better. • We get stronger when we test ourselves. Adversity can make us better. We must be challenged to improve, and adversity is the challenger. ON CHARACTER • Ability may

get you to the top, but character keeps you there. Your character is what you really are; your reputation is merely what others think you are. • It is what you learn after you know it all that counts. • Players with fight never lose a game; they just run out of time. • Be most interested in finding the best way, not in having your own way. • Never make excuses. Your friends don't need them, and your foes won't believe them. • You are no better than anyone else, and no one is better than you.

ON THE SPIRITUAL LIFE • I've never stopped trying to do what's right. I'm not doing it to earn favor with God. I'm doing it because it's the right thing to do. • If we magnified blessings as much as we magnify disappointments, we would all be much happier. • Being true to ourselves doesn't make us people of integrity. Charles Manson was true to himself, and as a result, he rightly is spending the rest of his life in prison. Ultimately, being true to our Creator gives us the purest form of integrity. • I wanted my players to always be searching, especially for truth. I wanted them to know what they believed and be able to defend it. Truth will always stand the test of scrutiny. • If I did only what I wanted to do, I would not be obedient to the Creator. Sometimes He wants us to do certain things that we may not feel like doing. When it comes to what God asks of us, we need more than good intentions—we need to follow through fully. • You can do more good by being good than any other way.

ON FAILURE • Success is never final. Failure is never fatal. It's courage that counts. • The man who is afraid to risk failure seldom has to face success. • Don't permit fear of failure to prevent effort. We are all imperfect and will fail on occasion, but fear of failure is the greatest failure of all. • Second-guessing yourself is wasted effort. Does worrying over it change it? Nope, it just wastes your time. And if you complain about it to others, you're wasting their time. Nothing is gained by wasting all that time. • I expected my players to make mistakes, as long as they were mistakes of commission. A mistake of commission happens when you are doing what should be done but don't get the results you want. • Close games are usually lost, rather than won. What I mean by that is that games are mostly won because the opponent makes mistakes during crucial moments.

ON TEAMWORK • We don't have to be superstars or win championships. All we have to do is learn to rise to every occasion, give our best effort, and make those around us better as we do it. • We can become great in the eyes of others, but we'll never become successful if we compromise our character and show disloyalty toward friends or teammates. The

reverse is also true: no individual or team will become great without loyalty. • Understanding that the good of the group comes first is fundamental to being a highly productive member of a team. • Much can be accomplished by teamwork when no one is concerned about who gets credit. • Kindness makes for much better teamwork. ON COACHING • The coach is first of all a teacher. • It's impossible to claim you have taught if there are students who have not learned. With that commitment, from my first year as an English teacher until my last as UCLA basketball teacher/coach, I was determined to make the effort to become the best teacher I could possibly be, not for my sake, but for all those who were placed under my supervision. • I never yelled at my players much. Artificial stimulation doesn't last long. It's like love and passion. Passion won't last as long as love. It's the same with yelling. • Approval is a greater motivator than disapproval, but we have to disapprove on occasion when we correct. I make corrections only after I have proved to the individual that I highly value him. If they know we care for them, our correction won't be seen as judgmental. I also try to never make it personal. • You discipline those under your supervision in order to correct, to help, to improve—not to punish. • Be slow to correct and quick to commend. ON LEADERSHIP • Leadership is the ability to get individuals to work together for the common good and the best possible results while at the same time letting them know they did it themselves. • A leader's most powerful ally is his or her own example. • Knowledge alone is not enough to get desired results. You must have the more elusive ability to teach and to motivate. This defines a leader; if you can't teach and you can't motivate, you can't lead. • Never be disagreeable just because you disagree. • I was proud when Nellie [his wife] told an interviewer, "I never could tell whether John had a good practice or a bad practice, because he never brought it home." • Profound responsibilities come with teaching and coaching. You can do so much good—or harm. It's why I believe that next to parenting, teaching and coaching are the two most important professions in the world. We've looked at what's wrong with youth sports and have, with Coach Wooden's helpful wisdom, considered a better way. Now let's talk about some keys that I believe can lead to success in sports and life.

Besides parents, we coaches are the earliest models of leadership kids have, so I can't emphasize enough the importance of what we say to them and how we say it, especially at young ages.

My parents' reply remains tattooed on my brain. It's as if they had rehearsed it. "Sometimes life isn't fair, but the coach is the coach, and he's always right, even when he's wrong." What?

I said, "This wasn't my first mistake, and it won't be my last. I also want you to know that I realize that every decision I make somehow influences people in this room, and I take that very seriously. I want the best for the team, and I want the best for you individually. I do, however, have to make many quick decisions every game. Sometimes they work out, and other times they don't. Just understand that I'm trying to do what's best for all of us."

Your talent can fool you into thinking you're way more mature than you really are.

I would then talk to the team and reemphasize the importance of being a good teammate. That starts and ends with thinking more about your team than you do about yourself. Selflessness is the goal—not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less. Make no mistake, developing that mind-set is not easy. It's opposed by our culture and every fiber of our being. Instinct and billions of dollars in marketing tell kids to get what they can when they can, and do whatever they have to do to get

Resign yourself to the fact that by and large the umpiring at the lower levels is going to be bad, and set your team's expectations accordingly. Everybody expects inconsistency, but you need to prepare yourself and your players for the possibility that there will be days when their umpires are actually going to miss more calls than they get right. Just understand that this is part of the gig.

That's why we insisted that our boys not even shrug or sigh or frown in the face of a bad call. And if an umpire cost them a game, or even a whole tournament, every player on our team was to shake the umpire's

hand, just as they would their opponents'. That's not easy, but that's what a classy team does.

I'm not talking about self-fulfillment, like becoming rich and famous, but rather inward pursuits—like becoming a loyal friend, a good parent, or someone others describe as • Loyal • Trustworthy • Generous • Eager to pass wisdom on to the next generation • Positive • Humble • Selfless Those are things we should all want to be remembered for; they serve as the very definitions of character. As Abraham Lincoln said, "Reputation is the shadow. Character is the tree."

These boys needed to know that we could have fun but that the greatest rewards in life, truly having fun, involved hard work and self-sacrifice.

Maybe I had picked it up from being raised in church and knowing that Jesus Himself had said that "he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Matthew 23:11-13).