

# Playing like a Catholic



Photo by Charles LeClaire  
Bill Belko, girls varsity basketball coach at St. Alexis in Wexford, instructs his team during a recent game.

## Sports coaches are reminded to embody fairness, integrity

By KRISTEN KOMYATTE SHEEHAN

Most would agree that participation in sports represents one of the best ways to maintain good health for young and old. However, sport is simply a physical activity. Sport done in a truly Catholic environment can help athletes, coaches and spectators to grow in mind and spirit.

Unfortunately, many toxins poison the current culture of sport: coaches displaying a win-at-all-cost attitude, parents berating athletes from the stands, athletes displaying poor sportsmanship on the field.

The Play Like A Champion Today educational program of the University of Notre Dame's Alliance for Catholic Education offers a different approach. PLC enlarges the minds and hearts of all members of a sport community to realize the full potential of sport. When sport is seen as a ministry, it can foster physical, emotional, moral and spiritual growth of coaches and young athletes.

Coaches have an important influence on young people. In PLC workshops, we ask coaches to name a coach who has made a difference in their life. We hear about coaches who cared about their athletes as people, not just players. We hear of coaches who were

loving and fair, but also instilled discipline and integrity. However, we also hear of coaches who engaged in unethical behavior, physically and emotionally abusing those entrusted to them. The "Play Like a Champion Today" mantra gives coaches a framework for helping young people develop as whole people.

## Play

We play sports for enjoyment. As Catholic Christians, we believe that we do not live by bread alone but for what nourishes our spirit. When we play, coach and watch sports with the right disposition, we experience a freedom, express our creativity and discover beauty.

Bart Giamatti, former commissioner of Major League Baseball, in the book "Take Time for Paradise," stated that "Sports represent a shared vision of how we as individual, team or community experience a happiness or absence of care so intense, so rare and so fleeting that we associate this experience with a religious experience."

Sports are meant to be an occasion to "re-create" ourselves as individuals and as members of a community of believers.

## Like a Champion

Coaches should develop not just "winners" but "champions." Playing like a champion doesn't refer to the scoreboard — it refers

to those qualities of character (excellence of humanity) that raise us above the ordinary.

Coaches can teach athletes to play like a champion by putting forth their best effort in all circumstances, playing within the rules of the game and playing in harmony with teammates. Playing like a champion means celebrating victory with humility and accepting defeat as an opportunity to learn and get better in the next competition.

Focusing on building champions enables coaches to teach moral virtues of prudence, courage, hope and justice.

## Today

No matter what happened in practice last week, no matter what the league standings, each practice and each game presents an opportunity for athletes to transcend themselves, to experience grace, to meet God. Susan Saint Sing in "Spirituality of Sport" said, "The child at play is in touch with the purest essence of the energy of God."

By helping every child to become a champion on the field, coaches participate in the process of building disciples of Christ on their team and in our church, and thus build the kingdom of God in the world.

Sheehan is associate director of Play Like A Champion Today, University of Notre Dame, Alliance for Catholic Education. For more information, go to [www.playlikeachampion.org](http://www.playlikeachampion.org).