

Thursday, April 23, 2009

The tendency that exists in all of us

By Susan Boyd

The other night I was watching the program "How I Met Your Mother." I admit this even though it may decrease my credibility in some people's eyes. But I find the show a pleasant diversion for Mondays. In this particular episode one storyline concerns Marshall, who is married to Lily, a kindergarten teacher. He agrees to coach her class basketball team. Marshall has an amiable even child-like demeanor, and Lily is just plain sweet.

So when the scene opens in the gym with Marshall and his pint-size players, our expectation is a bucolic moment. Lily enters with a large container of orange slices and Marshall turns to his team warmly asking "Hey kids, who wants to knock off early and have some of these orange slices?"

The team erupts in cheers, leaping up and down. But the crescendo quickly fades as Marshall evolves into a growling, screaming creature. "Well you can't. Because oranges are for winners and you little runts haven't made a single shot yet. You're embarrassing yourselves. You're embarrassing Miss Aldrin. And worst of all you're embarrassing me. That's it. Suicides. Baseline. Now run."

Lily stands horrified as he throws the basketball at a kid and shouts, "That's not running. That's falling."

So the next day, she pleads with Marshall not to pick on the kids.

"Lily, I'm not picking on the kids. I'm picking on the culture of losing around here. I'm going to win that game tomorrow." Lily laughs. "Win? We don't keep score." Like a boxer rising from the mat on the eight count, Marshall reels, "What!? You don't keep score. What's the point of playing if you don't keep score? If you don't know who's winning then who gets the trophy?" She coos, "Everyone. It's a participation trophy. Everyone gets one."

With utter confusion Marshall looks at the love of his life, "It's like you're speaking Chinese to me right now."

The writer, Joe Kelly, has to have young children. He wrote scenes that perfectly convey those rite of passage moments in youth sports. The show is funny because it's true. We have either known or observed the coach who thinks the players under his or her guidance should be handled like Dennis Rodman on his most petulant days.

Hopefully none of us have been that coach, but I think the tendency exists in all of us. We're a nation that exalts a "winning" mentality. We have award shows for just about anything you can name, and for what's left over we have the "People's Choice" awards. We don't know what to do with situations where scores aren't kept and everyone gets an award.

The episode continues with a flashback to Marshall being taught by his father, who was evidently the model for his coaching style. Lily realizes that unless she steps in, Marshall will continue the pattern with their children. So she orders him to be a "Teddy Bear stuffed with cotton candy and rainbows" when he's on the sidelines.

At the big game, he can barely choke out to the kids "go out and have fun." He gags on his encouragement. "Yay, way to let them score that easily." As a player kicks the ball, he instinctively reacts, "Billy you don't

kick the ball. This isn't soccer." Then he catches himself, "Unless kicking the ball is something you find fun, then you should do it."

As the team struggles into halftime Marshall has an apoplectic moment trying hard not to tell the team that "the score is 51 to nothing. But it doesn't matter because you are having fun."

Marshall does convince Lily to let him try it his way, which ends up being no more or less effective than the Mr. Nice Guy routine. At the game's conclusion, Marshall begrudgingly acknowledges that Lily's way isn't completely terrible. Lily will have none of it. "Your way stinks!"

This is the real moral of the tale. These are kids who have limited attention spans and haven't yet developed a cut-throat attitude toward life. So coaching won't brow beat them into winners, but coaches can contribute to their growth as happy and confident human beings.

(***Susan Boyd*** is a weekly blogger on [USYouthSoccer.org](http://www.usyouthsoccer.org) and talks from the soccer parents' perspective. You can catch Susan's blog each Monday at <http://www.usyouthsoccer.org/Blog.asp>.)