

The Matheny Manifesto: a letter to all "baseball parents" from a Little League Coach, who just happened to have moved on to become one of the more successful managers in MLB today.

- I always said that the only team that I would coach would be a team of orphans, and now here we are. The reason for me saying this is that I have found the biggest problem with youth sports has been the parents. I think that it is best to nip this in the bud right off the bat. I think the concept that I am asking all of you to grab is that this experience is ALL about the boys. If there is anything about it that includes you, we need to make a change of plans. My main goals are as follows:

(1) to teach these young men how to play the game of baseball the right way,

(2) to be a positive impact on them as young men, and

(3) do all of this with class.

We may not win every game, but we will be the classiest coaches, players, and parents in every game we play. The boys are going to play with a respect for their teammates, opposition, and the umpires no matter what.

With that being said, I need to let you know where I stand. I have no hidden agenda. I have no ulterior motive other than what I said about my goals. I also need all of you to know that my priorities in life will most likely be a part of how I coach, and the expectations I have for the boys. My Christian faith is the guide for my life and I have never been one for forcing my faith down someone's throat, but I also believe it to be cowardly, and hypocritical to shy away from what I believe. You as parents need to know for yourselves and for your boys, that when the opportunity presents itself, I will be honest with what I believe. That may make some people uncomfortable, but I did that as a player, and I hope to continue it in any endeavor that I get

into. I am just trying to get as many potential issues out in the open from the beginning. I believe that the biggest role of the parent is to be a silent source of encouragement. I think if you ask most boys what they would want their parents to do during the game; they would say "NOTHING". Once again, this is ALL about the boys. I believe that a little league parent feels that they must participate with loud cheering and "Come on, let's go, you can do it", which just adds more pressure to the kids. I will be putting plenty of pressure on these boys to play the game the right way with class, and respect, and they will put too much pressure on themselves and each other already. You as parents need to be the silent, constant, source of support.

Let the record stand right now that we will not have good umpiring. This is a fact, and the sooner we all understand that, the better off we will be. We will have balls that bounce in the dirt that will be called strikes, and we will have balls over our heads that will be called strikes. Likewise, the opposite will happen with the strike zone while we are pitching. The boys will not be allowed at any time to show any emotion against the umpire. They will not shake their head, or pout, or say anything to the umpire. This is my job, and I will do it well. I once got paid to handle those guys, and I will let them know when they need to hear something. I am really doing all of you parents a favor that you probably don't realize at this point. I have taken out any work at all for you except to get them there on time, and enjoy. The thing that these boys need to hear is that you enjoyed watching them and you hope that they had fun. I know that it is going to be very hard not to coach from the stands and yell encouraging things to your son, but I am confident that this works in a negative way for their development and their enjoyment. Trust me on this. I am not saying that you cannot clap for your kids when they do well. I am saying that if you hand your child over to me to coach them, then let me do that job.

A large part of how your child improves is your responsibility. The difference for kids at this level is the amount of repetition that they get. This goes with pitching, hitting and fielding. As a parent, you can

help out tremendously by playing catch, throwing batting practice, hitting ground balls, or finding an instructor who will do this in your place. The more of this your kids can get, the better. This is the one constant that I have found with players that reached the major leagues....someone spent time with them away from the field.

I am completely fine with your son getting lessons from whomever you see fit. The only problem I will have is if your instructor is telling your son not to follow the plan of the team. I will not teach a great deal of mechanics at the beginning, but I will teach mental approach, and expect the boys to comply. If I see something that your son is doing mechanically that is drastically wrong, I will talk with the instructor and clear things up. The same will hold true with pitching coaches. We will have a pitching philosophy and will teach the pitchers and catchers how to call a game, and why we choose the pitches we choose. There is no guessing. We will have a reason for the pitches that we throw. A pitching coach will be helpful for the boys to get their arms in shape and be ready to throw when spring arrives. Every boy on this team will be worked as a pitcher. We will not over use these young arms and will keep close watch on the number of innings that the boys are throwing.

I will be throwing so much info at these boys that they are going to suffer from overload for a while, but eventually they are going to get it. I am a stickler about the thought process of the game. I will be talking non-stop about situational hitting, situational pitching, and defensive preparation. The question that they are going to hear the most is "What were you thinking?" What were you thinking when you threw that pitch? What were you thinking during that at bat? What were you thinking before the pitch was thrown, were you anticipating anything? I am a firm believer that this game is more mental than physical, and the mental may be more difficult, but can be taught and can be learned by a 10 and 11 year old. If it sounds like I am going to be demanding of these boys, you are exactly right. I am definitely demanding their attention, and the other thing that I am going to

require is effort. Their attitude, their concentration, and their effort are the things that they can control. If they give me these things every time they show up, they will have a great experience.

The best situation for all of us is for you to plan on handing these kids over to me and the assistant coaches when you drop them off, and plan on them being mine for the 2 or so hours that we have scheduled for a game, or the time that we have scheduled for the practice. I would like for these boys to have some responsibility for having their own water, not needing you to keep running to the concession stand, or having parents behind the dugout asking their son if they are thirsty, or hungry, or too hot, and I would appreciate if you would share this information with other invited guests...like grandparents. If there is an injury, obviously we will get you to help, but besides that, let's pretend that they are at work for a short amount of time and that you have been granted the pleasure of watching. I will have them at games early so we can get stretched and loosened up, and I will have a meeting with just the boys after the game. After the meeting, they are all yours again. As I am writing this, I sound like the little league Nazi, but I believe that this will make things easier for everyone involved.

I truly believe that the family is the most important institution in the lives of these guys. With that being said, I think that the family events are much more important than the sports events. I just ask that you are considerate of the rest of the team and let the team manager, and myself know when you will miss, and to let us know as soon as possible. I know that there will be times when I am going to miss either for family reasons, for other commitments. If your son misses a game or a practice, it is not the end of the world, but there may be some sort of repercussion, just out of respect for the kids that put the effort into making it. The kind of repercussions could possibly be running, altered playing time, or position in the batting order.

Speaking of batting order, I would like to address that right from the top as well seeing that next to playing time this is the second most complained about issue, or actually tied for second with position on the defensive field. Once again, I need you to know that I am trying to develop each boy individually, and I will give them a chance to learn and play any position that they are interested in. I also believe that this team will be competitive and when we get into situations where we are focusing on winning; like a tournament for example; we are going to put the boys in the position that will give the team the best opportunity. I will talk with the boys individually and have them tell me what their favorite position is and what other position they would like to learn about. As this season progresses, there is a chance that your son may be playing a position that they don't necessarily like, but I will need your support about their role on the team. I know that times have changed, but one of the greatest lessons that my father taught me was that my coach was always right...even when he was wrong. The principle is a great life lesson about how things really work. I hope that I will have enough humility to come to your son if I treated him wrong and apologize. Our culture has lost this respect for authority mostly because the kids hear the parents constantly complaining about the teachers and coaches of the child.

I need all of you to know that we are most likely going to lose many games this year. The main reason is that we need to find out how we measure up with the local talent pool. The only way to do this is to play against some of the best teams. I am convinced that if the boys put their work in at home, and give me their best effort, that we will be able to play with just about any team. Time will tell. I also believe that there is enough local talent that we will not have to do a large amount of travel, if any. This may be disappointing for those of you who only play baseball and look forward to the out of town experiences, but I also know that this is a relief for the parents that have traveled throughout the US and Canada for hockey and soccer looking for better competition. In my experiences, we have traveled all over the Midwest and have found just as good competition right in our back

yard. If this season goes well, we will entertain the idea of travel in the future.

The boys will be required to show up ready to play every time they come to the field. Shirts tucked in, hats on straight, and pants not drooping down to their knees. There is not an excuse for lack of hustle on a baseball field. From the first step outside the dugout they will hustle. They will have a fast jog to their position, to the plate, and back to the bench when they make an out. We will run out every hit harder than any team we will play, and will learn how to always back up a play to help our teammates. Every single play, every player will be required to move to a spot. Players that do not hustle and run out balls will not play. The boys will catch on to this quickly. The game of baseball becomes very boring when players are not thinking about the next play and what they possibly could do to help the team. Players on the bench will not be messing around. I will constantly be talking with them about situations and what they would be doing if they were in a specific position, or if they were the batter. There is as much to learn on the bench as there is on the field if the boys want to learn. All of this will take some time for the boys to conform to. They are boys and I am not trying to take away from that, but I do believe that they can bear down and concentrate hard for just a little while during the games and practices.

I know this works because this was how I was taught the game and how our parents acted in the stands. We started our little league team when I was 10 years old in a little suburb of Columbus, Ohio. We had a very disciplined coach that expected the same from us. We committed 8 summers to this man and we were rewarded for our efforts. I went to Michigan, one went to Duke, one to Miami of Florida, two went to North Carolina, one went to Central Florida, one went to Kent State, and most of the others played smaller division one or division two baseball. Four of us went on to play professionally. This was coming from a town where no one had ever been recruited by any colleges. I am not saying that this is what is going to happen to our

boys, but what I do want you to see is that this system works. I know that right now you are asking yourself if this is what you want to get yourself into and I understand that for some of you it may not be the right fit. I also think that there is a great opportunity for these boys to grow together and learn some lessons that will go beyond their baseball experience. Let me know as soon as possible whether or not this is a commitment that you and your son want to make.

Thanks,

Mike Matheny