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Talking a Good Game

Dan Edelman tries his hand at coaching Little League the CrossFit Kids way.

By Dan Edelman

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All images: Dan Edelman

"I want to be the greatest shortstop in New York Yankee history."

Bold words for a 6-year-old.

Or not.

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Really just the equivalent of wanting to be an astronaut, a movie star, president or master chief when he grows up. But in that instant—and being a has-been who, for one regretful decision, never quite got the game out of his system—I decided I'd help my son get as far as he wanted to go in baseball.

Ensuring he had good gear and opportunities to play would be relatively easy—just takes money or, rather, credit. It would be tougher to find him the proper training; that is, knowledge and leadership in a fertile environment. Options were limited, despite the fairly robust youth-baseball scene in Ramona, Calif.

And there was no way I was coaching my son. Ever. I'd determined that even before I had children, not least because I doubted my ability to instruct kids in a sport that had evolved well beyond my experience. I had other reasons:

- Loud-mouthed parents living through their kids.
- Has-been/never-were, know-it-all-know-nothing coaches using the diamond and the boys as a stage and props for their personal psychodramas.
- Unfocused, uninterested, un-coachable kids who, despite the classic fiat, cry.



Could more effective practice have prevented this lack of focus?

Not enticing at all.

Besides, any time I contemplated the notion, I found myself questioning my true motivation. I mean, of course this was about my ego, but did I think I would find it gratifying to do something together with my boy and teach other kids something about the game, or was I really just drifting about the edges of some dreary hero fantasy?

My son has been playing organized ball since he was 5—he's 9 now. Five seasons. Most of that time, I've been a spectator, one of the "birds on the fence," offering an extra hand for fungo drills or batting practice, generally keeping out of it for the aforementioned reasons. (I did actually take on the assistant "coaching" spot for my son's second T-ball season—but, really, T-ball at that age barely qualifies as organized sport.) But I've observed.

I've had plenty of time to contemplate the mental side of CrossFit from amidst the desolation following an epic cratering of some WOD or another.

I've seen aimless practices painfully rote and void of any genuine preparation for actual game play. I've seen kids not make plays simply because they didn't believe they could. I've seen coaches and dads humiliate their sons with no apparent awareness of their cruelty. And I've seen kids having all kinds of fun during the game, but not having fun playing the game.

So even though I had no intention of ever taking a team, a coaching philosophy gradually began to coalesce. Just a few basic what-if and it-would-seem-like ideas I never figured on testing. Nothing earthshaking for sure, but I'd idly ponder these theories from my perch on the fence.

During the 2010 tournament season, I found myself engaging in running commentaries about the ball games with another dad I knew from a couple of seasons, and I learned he shared my perspective. We both wanted to help our boys develop their baseball so they could go as far as they wanted to go. The short of it was we decided to play "Daddy Ball": we would take a team—he as manager, I as coach—protect our kids from certain self-deluded frauds and, if all went well, provide a good environment in which to sharpen our boys' skills with an eye toward long-term development.

Operative words: "if all went well."

And it wasn't just about my boy; there'd be 11 other players (and their parents) to whom I'd have a responsibility to provide a fruitful season. I was reasonably confident my viewpoint was sound. I was less confident I could communicate it to a dozen 9- and 10-year-olds. What I needed was a teaching methodology with which to frame my fledgling philosophy. What I turned to was CrossFit Kids.

"Baseball is 90 percent mental—the other half is physical." —Yogi Berra

Like much common wisdom, Berra's quote seems, among other things, pretty obvious, a cliché even; sport performance hinges on mental preparation. In many ways, the mental dimension of baseball is essentially like any other sport. Dot your mental I's and cross your mental T's, and the athletic requirements are more readily fulfilled.

But there's something about baseball that distinguishes it from more fluid sports like basketball, tennis, soccer and hockey. For those uninterested in the game, baseball seems boring: long lulls characterized by routine game play broken up with occasional bursts of action. And if you're not down with it, then that action doesn't hold a candle to play by play in, say, football.

From inside the sport, a third baseman might spend six innings with nothing and then, bang, a shot down the line that could make the difference between win or loss; or a player sits on the bench for nine innings before getting the nod to pinch hit with the game on the line; or a relief pitcher is expected to put out the starter's fire with tens of thousands of fans mercilessly screaming hatred at him. One pitch can change a ball game. You gotta remain focused, you gotta know the situations from pitch to pitch, and you gotta execute when the time comes. And the time often comes rather suddenly.

On the whole, this kind of alertness eludes 9- and 10-year-olds such that game play is marked by a lot of spaciness and chicken chasing, and coaching at that level involves cat herding and handholding, hand wringing and hands over the eyes.

By encouraging kids to test their athletic limits, a coach can show them they already have what it takes to be better players.

CrossFit made me a student of the mental game. Sounds pretentious, but the fact is the mental dimension is the weakest link in my decidedly tenuous CrossFit chain. Similar to Daigle (8), I pretty much suck at CrossFit, which lends me a certain singular vantage point from which to study the program and sport. I've had plenty of time to contemplate the mental side of CrossFit from amidst the desolation following an epic cratering of some WOD or another. I've learned a lot. Mostly unpleasant stuff about myself, but also a great deal about the significance of mental toughness, discipline and preparedness.

Coupled with that is my experience as a CrossFit trainer under the tutelage of CrossFit's Director of Youth Training and CrossFit Kids founder Jeff Martin at CrossFit Brand X in Ramona. There I've learned—and continue to learn—about differences between children and adults with respect to athletic development, mental preparation for sport and sport conditioning more generally. So by the time the 2011 baseball season rolled around, my coaching philosophy for 9- and 10-year-olds centered on three inter-related principles:

1. Most kids are better baseball players than they realize, but they need to test their limits.
2. More than just lip service must be paid to the concept of hustle.
3. The assertion that youth sports should be fun for children is empty rhetoric and does not serve the kids.



Confidence and desire will improve almost any young player's game.

“Ya gotta believe.” —Tug McGraw

Since my son's first T-ball season, I noticed something about the expectations for defensive play.

For example, right up through “mustang” level play (ages 9-10), most adults don't really expect the average ballplayer to catch fly balls, particularly if the play requires ranging to get the ball. More significantly, most kids don't seem to think it possible, either. Kids simply don't think they can make the play. Putting aside technical aspects, kids drift toward fly balls with no urgency. This lack of urgency is unwittingly reinforced by the connotation fits parents toss if an outfielder actually gloves a fly ball. It's a miracle! A youth baseball field is awash in stealth anti-Greg Amundson negative self-talk and other talk, thought and energy.

I contend a baseball coach can make young players better without teaching them anything new about the game, rather, by getting them to believe they can get to the ball, make the catch, beat out a grounder to shortstop, stay in the box and drive the pitch. By encouraging kids to test their athletic limits, a coach can show them they already have what it takes to be better players.

How is this done?

Well, it occurred to me that this apparent “can't” is really more about a lack of want. The kids have to want to field that ball. They have to want to get to first base. They have to want to hit. In other words, they have to want to be involved in the game. Knowing you are capable of being involved in the game—i.e., confidence—stokes that desire. And, in many ways, this confidence-fueled desire is the essence of athleticism. So kids can make the play if they want to make the play, if they know they can make the play. That's obvious for sure, and just as obvious is the notion that “hustle” is critical to achieving this. Great plays do not require great players.

“You'd be surprised how many shortcomings you overcome by hustle,” Pete Rose said (17). I agree. The problem is getting 9- and 10-year-olds to understand the purpose of hustle, a concept that has kind of been hollowed out into just another sports cliché.

Nice hustle.

We gotta hustle.

Hustle in.

Hustle out.

Show some hustle.

What does that mean? Out on the diamond, such phrases take on the character of white noise.

In one way, hustle is a means of achieving a proper state of behavioral and physiological arousal so an athlete can perform. For example, we demanded our team hustle on and off the field. Whereas the manager considered it classy, I looked at it as mental preparation for the kids. We also demanded kids sprint to every base. A dribbler back to the pitcher? You run like your life depends on it. We demanded hustle during practices as well (another cliché: you play the way you practice—but it's true). Same went for between-inning warm-up: have a purpose. Hustle psyches the players up and whispers to the opposing team that we're going to shut 'em down or light 'em up.

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confidence-fueled desire is
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Hustle also is a way to get kids to discover their limits. You get a player to hustle and all of sudden he's under a fly ball he might otherwise consider uncatchable. You get a kid who's afraid of getting picked off first base to take what seems like a death-defying lead and have him dive back safely to the base and all of a sudden you've created a base-stealing threat. Successes like these instill confidence and a sense of adventure that encourage kids to take the kinds of chances that lie at the core of hustle, that form the foundation on which skills can be built. So without teaching anything technical, the kid is a better player, basically having gifted himself with lifelong abilities he's always possessed.



***When kids hustle, they take chances and
discover new abilities.***

And frankly, hustle is just another way of saying “intensity.” For CrossFitters, that’s a rather loaded term, isn’t it? In that light, it might be easier to understand why some kids don’t seem to want to hustle. We need to be careful how much intensity we demand from children. So how do you elicit intensity from 9- and 10-year-olds? How do you get them to want to contribute so they can make the plays? How do you get them to hustle with purpose?

**“When they start the game, they don’t yell,
‘Work ball!’ They say, ‘Play ball!’” —Willie Stargell**

Sports are supposed to be fun for kids. That’s what they say. “They” being adults. Adults have it all figured out because they have the vast wisdom that comes with age. If nothing else, youth baseball should be fun. Here in Ramona (and elsewhere), the baseball program is known as “rec league.” It’s recreational.

Just go out and have a good time.

Havin’ fun now, right?

Here we go now, kid, have some fun up there!

Fun.

Fun how, exactly? You know, playing. Oh.

Many adults have determined kids should just play baseball “for fun”—who cares who wins or loses or how you play the game? Kids need to be able to go out and have a good time with their sports—no consequences, no bad feelings, everybody’s an MVP.

Many adults have determined kids should just play baseball “for fun”—who cares who wins or loses or how you play the game? ... That’s over-rationalized nonsense.

That’s over-rationalized nonsense. During a game, 9- and 10-year-olds can have fun doing a whole lot of stuff that’s got nothing to do with baseball. Sure, they ain’t worried about winning or losing—heck, they haven’t a concern in the world. “How many outs? What’s the score? Can I get something from the snack bar? Oh, am I on deck?”

Further, these efforts to protect children’s self-esteem from reality amount to only a weak salve for the information-society-spawned anxieties plaguing adults and fail miserably to help fledgling athletes grasp a huge part of baseball: outs, errors and, yeah, losing.

“Baseball is the only field of endeavor where a man can succeed three times out of 10 and be considered a good performer.” —Ted Williams

That’s Ted Williams, one of the greatest hitters in the history of the game. Basically, when it comes to baseball—particularly hitting, which is the most heavily weighted measure of success in youth baseball—players fail. A lot. In my opinion, this dimension is not addressed often enough. Certainly not with the objective of encouraging the idea of failing forward. So kids have trouble handling failure; i.e., when they do not perform like the all-stars our society insists we all are.

Well, I just tried to go out and have some fun, but watching that third strike and hearing everyone cheering for the pitcher sure didn’t seem like much fun to me. Mom’s shrieking, “Nice try!” and “That’s OK!” But it doesn’t feel nice or OK.

The assertion that there’s no crying in baseball is really just wishful thinking at the mustang level. And the real problem here is the kid does not fail forward, which CrossFit Kids supports intrinsically and organically. A player can carry that apparent failure with him throughout a game and even the season, caught in a vicious cycle that terminates with a headlong crash into that delicate self-esteem we’re all so concerned about safeguarding.

The ultimate goal of CrossFit Kids is to pair fitness with fun so kids embrace super-wellness as a lifestyle from an early age. That fun is in evidence everywhere during a CrossFit Kids class. From the vibrant whiteboard to the energetic trainers to being with friends to the special themes to the music choices and especially through to the game, CrossFit Kids always associates class time with fun. Why? The children might not always comprehend the reason they are participating in the program, but if they’re always having a good time, what could be bad? I borrowed this simple but powerful idea and tweaked it a bit. I started with the assumption that the kids knew why they were on the diamond and then, from the very first team meeting, I engaged in a process of attaching fun to a particular concept: competitive baseball.

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That is, we’re not here to have fun playing; we’re here to have fun playing baseball. Big difference. In fact, that difference is similar to the distinction between a CrossFit Kids class and a Teen/Advanced class, where fun begins to look like adult CrossFit fun.



Everybody makes errors. The key is to teach kids how to learn from their mistakes and improve.

We emphasized this specific idea constantly: it's fun to give your best effort on the baseball field; it's fun to catch fly balls and field grounders; it's fun to steal bases; it's the most fun to hit. We tied that idea to the notion of contributing, of "making something happen" during the game. Just as a child who associates CrossFit Kids with fun will want to keep returning to class, a kid who connects competitive baseball with fun is going to chase that fun via the means I have put forth as the best way to get there: hustle. And along the way, the kid is going to make something (positive) happen and make a contribution.

In this context, we also tried to get the kids to understand how much of baseball is about making outs and how some outs are actually productive; that is, they make something happen. We discussed errors and how they're part of the game; everybody makes them. We often mentioned how even professional ballplayers have bad moments and that while they're probably not happy about it, they get out there next time ready to give their best effort. After games, we urged the kids to think about not only what was good about their effort but also what they might want to correct for next time.

Strike out, boot a groundball, launch a throw into the stands—every player does these things. What every player does not do is learn from those inevitable miscues and get right back in there ready for the next opportunity. Kids do not learn how to fail forward. Simply telling a kid that "it's OK" after an error—as if you're letting him off the hook—is not enough. He knows it's not OK (just like a kid knows his team is losing even if you tell him not to worry about the score), and now he's going to stress over what's gonna happen the next time a ball is hit to him.

After an error, we take the player aside and tell him that he will have another chance to contribute, but that he has to be ready. And if he is ready—wants to field, wants to hit, etc.—then there is fun to be had. Keep at it, keep hustling, there's always another chance to contribute, always another opportunity to have a good time playing competitive baseball.

"In baseball, my theory is to strive for consistency." —Tom Seaver

Our baseball league is pay to play. Nothing unusual about that. Parents register their kids to play the sport of baseball: springtime rec ball. Practices are more about getting teams ready to play games than they are about long-term development (we had young kids coming into the division and a couple of first-time players). Further, busy family and league schedules do not lend themselves to pursuing any kind of genuine developmental program. We knew this going into the season and set out to provide the kids (and parents) with the most bang for their buck.

Prior to each practice, the manager emailed a practice plan to the parents and asked them to review it with their kids. Consider this the whiteboard.



A shorter, fast-moving practice keeps kids engaged and improves their hustle.

Practices were structured similarly to a CrossFit Kids class. We began with a buy-in comprising throwing with a purpose, focusing on technique and arm strength (long toss scaled for mustang division); a short dynamic warm-up; and a base-running drill that emphasized speed, accuracy, sliding and ball awareness. Skill work generally focused on one or two defensive skills. We would then move on to situational defense, rotating base runners and position players. Sometimes we would end with coach-pitch batting practice under game conditions, which the kids enjoyed the most. But more often, given the complexities of hitting, we held batting practice at the manager's batting cage on a separate day.

Many rec-league coaches seem to think the more baseball, the better. So they hold two-to-three-hour practices up to three times a week. I found that kids spent a lot of that time standing around waiting to do stuff. At this age, standing around usually means screwing around. CrossFit Kids suggests keeping classes well-oiled, flexible and short to hold kids' attention. We applied that and ran

shorter-than-average practices using drills designed to engage all the kids and minimize standing around. Any general loss of focus and we changed things up or even ended practice; we ran one field practice and one batting practice a week most of the season. Perfect practice makes perfect play, and we embraced that cliché by really focusing on rudiments and encouraging as much hustle during workouts as we wanted to see during games.

But let me reiterate: given the compressed time frame in which to work, practices were about game preparation and not long-term development. In this way, my baseball-coaching experience differed fundamentally from CrossFit Kids. As much as we wanted to, we did not have the luxury of really breaking down highly complex skills like hitting and hammering technique over a long period of time in pursuit of consistency, which is as much a pillar of the CrossFit Kids program as it is for CrossFit. We went after a level of consistency as best we could, and I was able to draw on CrossFit Kids for assistance in how I approached technical corrections.



Young players respond well to simple, kid-friendly cues.

Cues were simple and kid-friendly (32), particularly for the less experienced players; e.g., “squish the bug” is a popular (if ultimately off base) cue to help first-time players learn how to use their hips when swinging a bat. During batting practices, I tried to provide clear explanations along with various cues. This was not only for the players but also for any interested parents who might be listening. Over time, the explanations were dropped and the cues simplified even more as the players learned. For the more experienced players, I found the cues need not be as much fun as most of the CrossFit Kids cues. Not as long as I provided clear—and I mean “clear for kids”—explanations of what the cues and corrections were intended to accomplish.

Further, my experience with CrossFit Kids taught me to mitigate the one flaw that would yield the most improvement. Hitting is a hugely complicated endeavor. At this level and given the time frame within which we could work, I found the most productive problem area to address was the issue of focusing; i.e., seeing the ball.

“Keep your eye on the ball.” Who hasn’t heard that? There are a plethora of cues to address this, but the one I got the best response to was, “See the ball to the bat” (even though hitters do not actually see the ball hit the bat). For our team, this one cue led to success. It’s important to note that, when it came to game time, we wanted the players concentrating only on the baseball while in the batter’s box, so we tried to avoid all but the simplest cues, which were given prior to the batter stepping in. As the season progressed, I was able to use just the word “eyes” or even two fingers pointed at my eyes, Focker style.

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This simple cueing method was used for our pitchers as well. Each tended toward a particular mechanical flaw, and once he understood that and its respective correction, we could cue quickly and simply between pitches so as not to distract when attention needed to be directed at the catcher’s mitt.

**“I motivate players through communication.”
—Tommy Lasorda**

Having the knowledge is one thing, and a good repertoire of cues is all well and good, but you have to be able to connect with your athletes to have any beneficial impact. In a significant way, CrossFit Kids taught me how to present myself to the players. I worked hard to make sure my cues were affirmative: “do this” rather than “don’t do that.” In addition, something positive accompanied any criticism or discussion of a lack of execution (e.g., strikeout): “Great cut, but next time keep your head in and see the ball to the bat.” Or a little differently, I might remind a player displaying a lack of confidence in the batter’s box we all know he’s capable of hitting because we’ve seen him do it before and that he’ll have another chance to contribute. And a chance to contribute means a chance to have fun.

I likely was the most animated first-base coach in the league. Some people who know me might've been a little taken aback at how excited I got once the bat contacted the ball or when we had base runners. People who really know me (or maybe have seen me deadlift) would not have been surprised at all; the coach's box was where I gave my best effort. My enthusiasm was a manifestation of my state of behavioral and physiological arousal, which I required to do my job. Our hitters had a series of simple goals: get on first base, then get to second, then third, then home, because scoring runs is fun. In fact, I tried to make sure achieving each of those goals was a good time: leading off and getting in the pitcher's head, stealing bases, sliding under the tag, advancing on over-throws. My job was to promote the proper mindset—i.e., hustle—and help them give their best effort, make something happen, contribute and have as much fun as possible on the base paths.

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When it came to our pitchers, I was more reserved. Cool concentration was what I wanted from my guys on the mound. At the mustang level, simply throwing strikes makes for a solid pitcher. However, throwing strikes also means giving the opposing team a chance to hit. This clashes with the irrational (but widely accepted among 9- and 10-year-olds) idea that a good pitcher strikes everyone out. Often our pitcher did his job and threw a ground ball, but it would promptly be booted for an error. This generated much angst when coupled with the usually empty and misguided "encouragement" from parents:

"You can do it!"

"C'mon now!"

"Throw strikes!" (Well there's a novel idea.)

"Just relax!" (Worst ever.)

I then became the chiller, doing my best to let the pitcher know he was executing properly and steer his focus back toward the glove. À la CrossFit Kids, the language was all positive, and the aim was to help them have fun giving their best effort.

Technical cues remain the essence of the coaching—and again, they need not always be kid-friendly provided their purpose is clearly articulated.

So I took my lead from CrossFit Kids for aspects of my communication style. However, in some key ways, my style does not fit the ideal CrossFit Kids advocates for children that age. While I can relate to older kids and enjoy working with the Teen/Advanced class, I am no poster boy for a Kids class. I am neither bubbly nor smiley, playful nor particularly patient, and I'm pretty sure the children would smell the fear on me and, in short order, tie me up and set me on fire in lieu of the game. That said, I have worked with a few baseball teams, ages 5-11, and CrossFit Brand X's Teen/Advanced class does contain a growing crew of (qualified) preadolescent athletes. While my experience is by no means comprehensive, I would like to offer an observation.

CrossFit Kids recommends the Kids class include children ages 5-12. However, I think there's a subpopulation at the top end of the age range that might benefit from a class that combines the programming methodology of Kids with the coaching approach of Teen/Advanced. This subpopulation comprises athletes with a few years of competitive sports experience. My feeling is these kids have a more mature understanding of intensity and are developing an awareness of performance accountability and thus a more sophisticated sense of what's fun about physical activity. They might tend to disengage in classes with younger children where the atmosphere strikes them as a bit too warm and fuzzy.



Year-round baseball and travel teams can lead to burnout and overtraining, even in young children.

Keep in mind these athletes don't necessarily move better than other Kids-level children, so they require the same attention to fundamental technique under no or very light load to foster the neuromuscular adaptation key to training gains in preadolescence (15,28,33). However, I contend this subpopulation of athletes will respond to a sterner communication style than what CrossFit Kids finds works so well for most children. Technical cues remain the essence of the coaching—and again, they need not always be kid-friendly provided their purpose is clearly articulated—but we can pepper that with a discourse that identifies overarching goals and actions to match those goals.

For example: you squat to become better ballplayers. The more you squat and the harder you work, the stronger hitters and throwers you'll become. You're working the big muscles that make you powerful.

We imply intensity without pushing the kids, we require staying on task without overly sugaring requests with niceties, and our encouragement and kudos tend toward the low-key and poignant; e.g., a finger point and "nice" or a fist bump. My experience has found these young athletes embrace the more serious atmosphere and remain engaged. Let me be absolutely clear: I am in no way suggesting these athletes are somatically more ready to handle higher intensities, larger volumes or heavier loads than the less sports-minded CrossFit Kid. I am suggesting these athletes might respond better to a communication style stripped of the kid gloves. This might have implications not only for retention but also for addressing the questionable privileging of sports-specific training over general physical preparedness, or GPP, for this age group (33).

"I ain't an athlete, lady. I'm a baseball player."
—John Kruk

In Southern California, we can play baseball year round. It's a gift and a curse. Here in Ramona, with rare exception, common youth-baseball wisdom has the big-dawg gamers do just that. Spring rec league and postseason tournaments; summer, fall and winter tournament ball; and travel ball throughout. Further, youth baseball (like all youth sports) has evolved since I played. The performance expectations for kids are much higher now. Big dawgs are encouraged to "play up" in older divisions. Some kids play on multiple travel-ball teams, and there is a kind of mercenary attitude among some (parents) who jump from club to club, seeking out the best, most prestigious program.

However, the sport's evolution has outstripped children's athletic development, and the problem with this is multifold. The athlete is at risk for mental burnout, physical and mental overtraining, and overuse injury (5,18,26,29,38,39). Although, in my experience, many parents recognize and act to address burnout in their children, fewer grasp the concepts of overtraining and overuse and their relationship to year-round sport-specific training. Further, I have not seen that many baseball parents and rec coaches appreciate the value of GPP for sport performance. Bottom line for them: if you're not playing ball, you're losing ground.

In the last three or four decades, baseball's commitment to strength and conditioning has grown (7,20,35,42), and relatively recently, the benefits of CrossFit for baseball have been documented (14,19) and should be obvious to any CrossFitter who plays or has played the sport. Further, the aforementioned urgency for short-term gains in the local youth-baseball scene stands in opposition to literature on the athletic development of children and expert performance more generally (3, 6,13,21,33,34). As a parent, I get it: I want my kids to shine all of the time, too. But if my son is to have long-term success in baseball, I, as his father and one of his key mentors, need to exercise as much discipline as will be demanded of him in terms of bridling my desire for him to be the best of the best right now. My ongoing education in CrossFit Kids methodology helps me with this, and I view the program as the linchpin to my son's baseball journey, wherever that might lead.

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Given the stature of his parents and most of his extended family, my son will likely be undersized relative to the average pro ballplayer (29). To even the playing field when the time comes to try out for any higher-level competitive team, he will need beastly strength and power driving his baseball-specific skills. He will need to be a better athlete—stronger, faster, more agile, etc. CrossFit Kids is designed to provide that for the committed competitor. Although size is often judged as a proxy for strength (23), CrossFit Kids focuses on increasing work capacity by hot-rodding the motor; I want my son stepping onto the field with a warmed-over Hemi engine under the hood and an oversized gas tank.



CrossFit Kids can give smaller players the strength and power they need to compete against bigger athletes.

But that's not all that CrossFit Kids provides young athletes. The mental dimension of baseball is multifaceted. On one level, the ability to remain alert and ready for the ball throughout the entire course of a game is as much an issue of mental endurance as it is a child's interest in and knowledge of the sport, as well as basic emotional maturity. Further, even as a team sport, baseball's major components—pitching, hitting, fielding—are individual and often stressful endeavors for kids. Baseball, like many sports, calls for the kind of mental fortitude that Lisbeth Darsh is talking about:

"CrossFit can be about finding the darkness—and making it work for you, instead of against you. The person you'll find alone in that workout is most likely not the person you want to show to anyone else. And that's okay. You need to learn this person, this place, this pain. You need to learn to drive yourself onward in a way that no one else ever can. Internal motivation is the key to success in CrossFit and so much of life." (10)



Don't be fooled—he's got a deadly fastball.

CrossFit Kids fosters this development by safely putting children in situations that require problem solving through hard work, goal-setting, persistence and self-discipline, often while under duress. CrossFit Kids—and particularly the Teen/Advanced class—is also a controlled environment where kids can test their athletic limits by engaging in carefully designed WODs where, for example, they might discover that what was once considered a one-rep-max power clean is now a weight they can handle for multiple reps with a high heart rate. That's a great way to inspire the confidence and sense of adventure so essential in youth sports, which is one of the first arenas wherein a child will find himself alone and challenged and in need of the internal resources that a full-blown CrossFit Kids program will develop organically through skill work, WODs and platform work.

**"Pitching is the art of instilling fear."
—Sandy Koufax**

So how do I know the CrossFit Kids program yields results that transfer to sport? There's some anecdotal evidence (25,31), but mostly I have my observations of my son's pitching progress over the last year. My son was a decent pitcher in 2010. Some technical inconsistencies kept his pitch count high and he occasionally let the stress get to him, but he was decent nonetheless. His pitching goal for 2011 was to decrease his pitch count and keep his cool on the mound; each would help the other. My overall and expressed expectation for him was simple: he would give his best effort every game. In the off-season, he matriculated from the CrossFit Kids class into the Teen/Advanced class and Teen Weightlifting.

When my son stepped back onto the mound this season, his fastball was overpowering. You could see the despair seep into the eyes of the innocent after a four-seamer popped the dot; one kid in particular broke into tears during his at-bats against my son (yeah, maybe there is a little crying in baseball—heh). When my kid took the mound, they should've placed a sign next to the batter's box: "Abandon hope all ye who enter here."

OK, enough hyperbole.

**The one outstanding
characteristic of my
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Of course, my boy gained strength and power simply by having a whole year of natural growth and development under his belt. But remember, like his dad, he's a little squid. There were much bigger pitchers in the league, all of whom had that same year under their belts. Not to mention they were all a year older than him to begin with—and generally considered star athletes. He threw harder than all of them. Why? Is it that my son is "naturally" better than the rest? Hmm, maybe, but that sounds too pat. Is it that he worked on his pitching all off-season? No. Other than a half-day clinic during pre-season (that many other pitchers attended, too), he put in exactly zero work before opening day—and almost zero between games during the season. The one outstanding characteristic of my squid-ly son's off-season vis-a-vis the other pitchers' preparation was his consistent participation in Brand X's CrossFit Kids Teen/Advanced class.

“The players make the manager. It’s never the other way.” —Sparky Anderson

We were the 2011 Ramona PONY League Mustang Division Tigers. We finished the season in third place with a record of 14-6, just two games out of first place. We defeated every team at least once. We came back and won games from up to 10 runs behind. We led the league or finished high in a number of offensive and pitching categories. And more important than the fact that the Tigers produced five all-stars was that all players contributed on more than one occasion to team wins and, in general, improved their level of play by season’s end. Many of the parents asked us to draft their kids again next year.

We did not stress winning per se; we stressed the idea that always giving our best effort would make for good games and a good time. The Tigers earned a reputation as an aggressive, hustling team. It became clear that no team was excited to go up against us. In fact, the manager of the league-champion Indians told me the only team he feared was us, the Tigers. We crushed them twice and almost won the third time save for a rookie coaching error in the greatest at-bat I’ve ever witnessed in a youth ball game, an at-bat that epitomized the idea of making the most of another chance to give your best effort and make something happen.

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Yeah, this sounds like some self-congratulatory showpiece about me and my kid that also trumpets—yet again—the awesomeness and bullet-proofness of CrossFit and CrossFit Kids. But the fact is my colleague and I had a successful first season as coaches because we had a good group of kids

who were ready to work with us. CrossFit Kids helped me connect with the Tigers; in a sense, the program fostered an environment in which the kids could flourish.

So is my kid gonna play for the Bronx Bombers? Highly doubtful. Doesn’t matter. What does matter is when he’s a bird on the fence, he can look back with no regrets or doubts about how far he could’ve gone. I believe CrossFit Kids and CrossFit will be instrumental in this.

Here are a few other quotes in closing:

“I’m just a ballplayer with one ambition, and that is to give all I’ve got to help my ball club win. I’ve never played any other way.” —Joe DiMaggio

“Show me a guy who’s afraid to look bad, and I’ll show you a guy you can beat.” —Lou Brock

“Anything less would not have been worthy of me. Anything more would not have been possible.” —Carl Yastrzemski

“Some guys are admired for coming to play, as the saying goes. I prefer those who come to kill.” —Leo Durocher

“You gotta be a man to play baseball for a living, but you gotta have a lot of little boy in you, too.” —Roy Campanella

Note: Throughout, I have chosen to use the male pronoun to indicate the players. For the record, two girls played in Ramona PONY Baseball’s Mustang Division, one of whom was on our team.

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