

This is Robert, the man crouched down with a team of little girls.

I haven't actually met him, but I watched him for almost two months. He coached my granddaughter's softball team a few years ago, seven and eight year olds. This man is a good coach, not because his team won the championship, but because he does three things:

1. He teaches the skill of softball.
2. He personalizes his instruction to each kid.
3. He mentors leadership every moment of each game.

While the rest of us are using the "game lingo" (you got this, good swing, that's OK, you'll get it next time, good try), coach Robert is mentoring: Can you see the ball all the way to your bat? How many outs do we have? Where's the play? Look at your feet — where do they need to be? Are you having fun? Let's see a smile. Practice a level swing — there it is — now feel that as your eye stays on the ball. Are you backing up the first baseman?

I could go on. There is not a single instruction that is not personalized. There is not a single instruction that is discouraging. He took one player who struggled to make contact with the ball during the regular season and had her hitting by the tournament - with personalized instruction - and mentoring her leadership ability. Some of his kids are charismatic and outgoing. Some are quiet examples. Some have great integrity and some persevere and some show a tendency toward service to others. He helps each of them to find that leadership quality in herself and develop it.

Nobody ever talked about the scores during the games. He encouraged his players to encourage the other team and to encourage each other. One evening I had to smile when one of the kids yelled: "How many outs everyone! Where's the play!" She took coach Robert's leadership and made it her own.

On the last night of the championship round the coaches of the other team were frustrated for their kids, who were also very good players, and some of that frustration came out at our coach. He acted with kindness and integrity, a great example of sportsmanship for his girls to observe. And his gentle competitive spirit in this picture was not one of gloating over beating the other team by many points, but one of pride for the great strides that each of them made. When he put the "medal" around each girl's neck, he personalized what they had done, as though each was his daughter.

Mentoring leadership. On the softball field with little girls. They will take what they learned into many other aspects of their lives. Thanks, coach Robert.

