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Three coaches still game after all these years

Profiles: The demands of county youth leagues have not deterred these parents from their roles as teachers, confidantes and cheerleaders.

Howard At Play

February 23, 2003 | By Lowell E. Sunderland | Lowell E. Sunderland, SUN STAFF

They're among the most unsung, anonymous but often formative jobs in all of sports - coaching kids. The work scares many newcomers but then, for some, exacts powerful and lasting fascination, involvement and memories.

Coaches in every youth sport unavoidably become part teacher, disciplinarian, cheerleader, chauffeur, fund-raiser, confidante, booster, mentor and even student. The demands include sometimes seemingly countless hours of spare time. The rewards, for all but a few, are psychic.

Virtually every youth league, regardless of the sport, begs and cajoles fathers - and mothers - to coach, and the turnover is never-ending.



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If you're tempted but haven't committed yet, or are just interested in what makes coaches tick, maybe these snapshots of three experienced, super-involved Howard County youth coaches can help your perspective.

Bill McCormack

McCormack, who lives in Columbia's Stevens Forest neighborhood, is quite likely dean of coaches of recreation-level teams in Howard County.

This winter marks his 19th season coaching boys 12 and 13 for the Columbia Basketball Association, and that alone would rank him among the county's most senior coaches.

But more remarkably, at 54, McCormack has devoted falls and springs for more than half his entire life - 29 years - to coaching girls soccer for the Soccer Association of Columbia/Howard County. He works with girls 9 to 12, and he has been at it so long that girls he coached when he was starting are now bringing their daughters to his teams.

Despite enough knowledge in both sports to coach at higher levels in each, he opts to stay with recreation-level players - those just learning.

"I love kids," said the father of a long-grown daughter, retired phone company engineer and holder of a degree in psychology. "And I like, I want to help kids learn life skills through the medium of sports."

Boys vs. girls in coaching terms? "You do a lot of things the same but others with subtle changes. The biggest difference is that boys tend to be more individualistic, so you have to teach teamwork. Girls, in general, are more social, so you have to talk about it being OK to be aggressive - taking a shot, for example, not always passing."

His reward? "I like seeing the kids do well, especially when they work through the frustration of having to learn things that aren't always easy. ... Later, when they become adults, I'm finding, it's being invited to dinner or to a wedding. It's also hearing parents say, 'You were a big influence on my daughter.' One of them even told me, 'You're the reason my daughter went to college.'"

Lee Stumpf

Stumpf, an Ellicott City restaurateur, has coached for more than half his adult life.

At 42, he has led boys in the Howard County Lacrosse Program for 14 years, the past seven as a travel-team coach, meaning players advanced past simply working on fundamentals.

Typical of many - maybe most - youth coaches and others who take leadership positions in youth organizations, Stumpf's coaching career has paralleled his children's playing careers. In his household, that's three sons.

This spring may prove to be Stumpf's last season as coach, he said, because his youngest son enters high school in the fall, meaning high school play next spring. "I might coach again, but not if it'd mean blocking someone else who's following a son. I wouldn't want that to happen."

He has had one unusual coaching treat, he said - being assistant coach to son Collin, 19, his eldest, for Hero's summer-league play last summer.

The former Mount St. Joseph High School player claims to be a demanding coach, particularly on physical conditioning ("I was probably harder on my boys than I should have been," he said).

But he also has a cardinal rule: "It can be tough, but you have to mix teaching with fun. It's a game. They've got to enjoy it."

Cindy Hall

Hall, at 38, is an Ellicott City resident who still plays her sport, which is softball. She can't imagine not playing - at times, five nights a week.

But Hall coaches kids, too. She has done it for seven years, and this spring, she will have only one team instead of her usual two.

Reason? As this year's softball commissioner in the Howard County Youth Program, she has overview duties for 41 rec-level teams and six travel squads.

"I grew up in a baseball family - my father and brother were really serious about it," she said. "I started when I was 7 playing slow-pitch softball in HCYP, then went to fast-pitch, and I've been playing ever since."

An accountant who works from home, Hall has two softball-playing daughters, 11 and 9, "who are more serious about swimming, which they do year-round."

Her motivation? "Softball is diminishing, I think, because so many girls are going in for soccer and lacrosse, but I want to give back to the sport, for one thing. I'm so passionate about softball, which you can play until you're old.

"And even if my daughters weren't still playing, I'd still want to be involved. I mean, HCYP gave me a foundation for life."

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