



The best job you'll ever have pays \$0

By: Gene Sapakoff

If you woke up alive this morning, you're probably qualified for one of the most important jobs in America. All you need is a moral compass and a smile. It happens every pre-spring: Recreation departments, Little Leagues and smaller leagues are looking for a few good men and women. They need volunteers to serve as head coaches and assistant coaches for youth teams in baseball, soccer, softball and other sports for kids from 5 to 18. No experience necessary. League officials will train. Equal opportunity employer. The pay stinks. In fact, this gig actually costs you money. Factor in the pizza party, the extra baseballs or soccer stuff you feel compelled to buy and add up all those juice boxes, and three months later you're in the red, \$20 at least. But consider this a chance to influence kids who need influencing, to dispense a few precious life lessons along with the Gatorade. Of course, it takes courage to offer encouragement. But you're up to it because you care, because you give a darn about the kids in the neighborhood (whether any of them are yours or not), because you have something to offer a few afternoons or nights a week.

A FEW SIMPLE THINGS

You don't have to know how to properly execute a corner kick or teach a pick-off move -- you will be pointed toward a coaching clinic or two for that. You just have to know how to have fun. We are not talking about saving the world here. But we are kidding ourselves if we think today's kids don't need a little more guidance than kids of past generations. These days, there are more single parents, more out-of-state dads and fewer wisdom-sharing grandparents within driving range.

A coach, therefore, fills a more important role than ever before. Kids of certain ages will tune out parents talking about discipline, teamwork, order, rules and sportsmanship. They will listen to the same stuff from a coach. Remember, you don't have to be perfect. You just have to remember a few simple things:

-- Grown-ups care way, way more about wins and losses than kids.

-- What kids remember most about a given season isn't a big game or a big play, but a team outing or a postseason cookout.

-- If a kid walks off the field feeling good about himself or herself after having learned something, you've done well.

A PRICELESS HIGH-FIVE

The funny thing is, grown-ups used to want kids involved in sports to keep them off the streets.

Now there aren't enough kids on the streets playing sports without adult supervision, mostly because parents are afraid of strangers. So organized sports are all the rage -- to keep kids off the Internet and away from PlayStation games, if only for a few hours. Few of these kids will go on to become top high school athletes: Most will participate in a given sport for only a few years, and some will quit after one season. But, hey, coach, that gives you a chance to plant a positive impression that might last a lifetime.

If not this spring, maybe next fall, or next spring. No, serving as a volunteer youth coach doesn't pay as well as your "real" job. But the reality in the face of a happy child on the other end of a high-five is priceless.