

Features

CYO sports aim at teaching basic lessons about life

By Lee Strong

Legendary football coach Vince Lombardi once said: "Winning isn't everything; it's the only thing."

Unless he was willing to change his mind, Lombardi wouldn't have lasted long as a coach with the Catholic Youth Organization (CYO).

"The focus (in CYO sports programs) is on the individual," explained Jama Dodson, director of Rochester's CYO. "We're trying to tell each kid, 'You're important; your participation is more important than winning the game.'"

This concern for the individual, a part of the CYO philosophy since the organization's introduction to Rochester in 1935, has received new emphasis in the last five years as the organization has struggled to dispell the myth that it's just a Catholic sports club.

The myth is hard to break.

CYO began as a Catholic response to the YMCA, which for many years was largely a Protestant organization, according to Dodson. Because Protestants and Catholics didn't mix at the time, and because parishes weren't able to offer adequate programs for young people, Bishop Bernard Sheil of Chicago organized the CYO in 1930.

Although the CYO ideal was "A sound mind is a sound body," in the early years the emphasis was on developing the body. By the 1950s, CYO was noted more for its competitive sports programs than for its efforts to develop minds and spirits.

By the 1970s, however, the need for a Catholic counterpart to the YMCA declined. The divisions between Catholics and Protestants had broken down, and parishes and schools had established programs for the young. The Rochester CYO sold its gym facilities at 50 Chestnut St., and began to shift its focus toward a comprehensive youth-ministry approach.

Today, the organization offers not only athletic services, but also job training, personal-development workshops and employment services. Still, the athletic program — encompassing basketball and softball leagues, and cheerleading — remains the largest of the CYO's services, and many people are not aware of what else the organization has to offer.

"We're trying to make more people aware that there's an ideal we're dealing with," Dodson explained. "We're trying to work with the whole child. This has been a part of CYO philosophy since the beginning, but we're trying to make it clear — to make it known more consistently."

The place to begin raising awareness, CYO officials decided five years ago, was with the coaches.

"The coaches are caring individuals," Dodson remarked. "They're all volunteers who think it's important enough just to work with the kids. What we've been trying to do in the last five years is to make them more aware of the whole child and what many (coaches) have been doing all along (in that direction.)"

At annual preseason orientation sessions, coaches were required to attend seminars explaining not only improved coaching tech-

niques, but also spirituality and CYO philosophy. Coaches were told they are youth ministers who should be concerned with character and spiritual development, not just winning games, Dodson said. And even in the technique seminars, coaches were asked not to run up scores against weaker teams, and to give every child a chance to play.

Steve Shockow, who has been involved with CYO throughout the transitional period and currently coaches three basketball teams, is enthusiastic about the new youth-ministry approach to coaching. "The goal of the program is to teach the kids basic lessons about life," he explained. "They learn to work together with other people and that everyone has a role to play. They get satisfaction out of working together, doing the best that they can, and achieving a goal — whether it's winning, getting everyone into the game, or just being competitive."

"Even when they don't succeed, they learn something," Shockow added. "There's a greater achievement (than succeeding) if you played hard and played by the rules."

The next step in changing the sports programs' focus came four years ago when CYO's Athletic Advisory Committee instituted the Faith Through Sports Award for the basketball program in an effort to "recognize young people who live their faith on and off the court." Father Bob Werth, a member of the CYO board of directors and chairman of the advisory committee, noted that the award has become more coveted than the most valuable player and most improved player awards.

In the past two years, CYO also has begun to place greater emphasis on parish involvement. Throughout the diocese, parishes have been celebrating CYO Sunday — this year on November 22 — to make parish communities aware of the organization's programs. In some parishes, players, cheerleaders and coaches took part in special CYO Masses.

In addition, CYO staff members have been helping parishes form athletic committees to supervise local CYO programs, help fund teams, ensure that CYO philosophy is emphasized in the programs, and link CYO to other parish youth-ministry programs. Representatives from parishes that already have committees will meet December 15 to discuss what they have done and to develop general guidelines for establishing committees in other parishes.

Besides coordinating youth-ministry services within parishes, committees will be able to "look at the broader picture" of youth ministry, Father Werth said. Time constraints often hinder coaches' attempts to guide kids toward CYO or parish programs that might help them in areas other than athletics. Despite a wealth of seminars, some coaches are also still in the

dark regarding other CYO programs. In addition, he noted, some coaches are uncomfortable dealing with questions of spirituality.

Father Werth acknowledged that the process of changing the CYO's image has just begun. Some parishes do not have CYO programs, and others have not stressed the new youth-ministry emphasis enough. Each year, however, he has seen signs of improvement. More coaches are awarding Faith Through Sports Awards, and this year's seminar about coaching as a youth ministry was conducted by a coach for the first time.

"The myth that (CYO is) only a sports organization will eventually die" the priest predicted, "when more people realize it offers probably the only decent youth programs available" for the youths of many parishes.



Tina Martinez (left) lends Kristin Haines a hand with clapping.



Jenny Parmlee questions a new routine.



Coach Wendy Wright goes over a new cheer with junior-high cheerleaders.

Bonnie Trafelet/Courier-Journal



St. Lawrence Parish's cheerleaders show off their final product.



Jessica Sopka laughs during a cheer.

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