**Through their eyes**

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I was going to blog on withdrawal from school sport as a possible sanction, but today something occurred that I must get off my chest.

Saturday morning school sport is one of the most rewarding elements of my job. My U13 team had just finished up the last game of the season and instead of letting them run off to change, they were encouraged to watch and support the U12 team on the next pitch who were still playing.

55 minutes of play had elapsed with my school losing 7-0 but pushing hard to restore some pride. The right wing for my school was giving the left back for the opposition a torrid time. It was clear that the young boy at left back for the opposition was tiring, probably having given all for almost an hour in stopping our best player from having any impact on the game. God this guy is good, he is quicker than me, fitter than me and has good feet. But I must be doing well. They haven’t scored, I’ve not let him into the game. We are winning 7-0. Parents from his side were shouting instructions ‘go with the runner’, ‘stand him up’, ‘push him wide’, ‘knock him off the ball’, ‘close him down’, ‘stay on your feet’. I know what I should do. I’ve been doing it all game. But they are adults. They might know better. Which one should I listen to? I can’t quite make it out. I’ll give them my attention. This young boy received all this verbal feedback all at once in the time taken to blink an eye. He looked over at these vocal parents, no doubt to try and understand what they were saying. This was the moment our right wing beat him on the inside, and found the head of our centre forward, who duly buried the ball in the back of the net.

The young left back from the opposition stood with his hands on his hips, laboriously breathing, head down. Oh no. That was my fault. I should never have taken my eyes off him or the ball. I’m so tired though. A few minutes to go. I’ve got to keep going. The calls from the side line of the parents lacked any sympathy or motivation. ‘Rubbish’, ‘get him off’, ‘you should have stood him up’, ‘why do you never listen.’ I’m sorry. I’m sorry I’ve let you down. I won’t let it happen again. Let’s get on with the game. This was mirrored by his team mates. Not one offered a hand, kind word or positive gesture. His centre back partner just ran past him and said, ‘what the hell were you doing’? I don’t know. I’m tired. I’ve given my best. I’m sorry. I’m sorry I’ve let you down.

He then hears the voice of his coach, beckoning him over to the side line. He slowly trots to the opposite side, under the full glare of players, parents and supporters. I’m sorry coach. I’m sorry I’ve let you down. I’m tired and everyone was shouting instructions at me and I didn’t know what to do. I tried to listen to them, and I made a mistake. This is embarrassing. Why do you need to talk to me now? We are winning though, we’ve played really well. ‘What the hell was that?!’ rang around the pitch. This coming from the coach of the opposition side. I was shocked. I looked at the parents of the opposition and they were not taking any notice. In fact, they were still discussing the mistake, whilst sipping on their branded coffees. I looked at the players on the pitch. The U12’s from my school were all stood still, looking at the scene that was unfurling on the opposite touchline. The opposition U12’s were jogging into place to restart. ‘You’re not fit enough, you’re lazy and keep your eyes on the bloody ball’ at the same time of saying this he threw, with some force, a ball at the child to make his point. It hit him square in the face, because the child was starring at the ground during this astonishing admonishment. ‘Go out there and sort it out.’ I’m worthless. I don’t want to be out there. Everyone’s looking at me and laughing. I’d rather be anywhere else than here right now.

3 minutes later the game ended. The left back spent those last three minutes playing through bitter tears. After the customary three cheers and handshakes the two teams huddled around their coaches for finals words. I listened to the NQT, an ex pro rugby player, deliver the debrief. ‘I want you to think about 3 positives from today’s game and then share those positives with another teammate.’ After giving them time to discuss he then asked four or five boys what positives they had and helped them expand on it to incorporate the whole team. Who tried hard? Who tried something new this time? What have they done that they haven’t done before? What improvements have they made from last week? He reminded them that he enjoyed coaching them, that they were a pleasure to spend time with and watch. This was in stark contrast the debrief that was happening just 15m away from us. The team that had won 7-1 were getting shouted at for conceding a ‘soft goal’. The left back was being singled out of some serious criticism in front of his peers. Now you could say that our approach may be the reason for our loss, but this is youth sports. The ultimate aim of youth sports must be to keep them playing and enjoying themselves. After what I have just witnessed the question shouldn’t be why do children withdraw from sport, it’s how have we got any of them playing at all?

I began writing this post in anger. That has turned to shame. Shame that I did nothing for that young left back. I didn’t challenge the parents. I didn’t challenge the coach. I didn’t say any words of comfort and encouragement to him. I did nothing to challenge the culture of intimidation and destruction I witnessed. I did nothing to challenge the fear and uncertainty that seemed to be apparent. Maybe it’s not my place to do so, but if not me, then who? Perhaps if we all spoke up and challenged, then these incidents would cease to happen.

Watching the opposition coach and the NQT within my department has made me reflect on my own practice. The positivity that our team ended with, even after a bad defeat, was tangible. He would leave the corrections and analysis for the next practice and allow them to depart the game with the belief that they were getting better as a team, that they were improving as individuals and that even in defeat the act of playing sport is an enjoyable experience. It has also made me think about the young people we coach. It is their time. It is their experience. It is their game. We are there for them, not the other way around. We need to remind ourselves and them of this simple fact; that We are there for them. Therefore, we should try to imagine everything we say and do through their eyes.