

# **SPORT SCIENCE**

## ***Breaking in the Rookies: How to deal with first time parents.***

*By Tim Enger*

### **Introduction**

Let's face it – football's a pretty popular sport. In Alberta it is a fixture on television via either CFL, NFL, or NCAA broadcasts from June to February (and if you add the Arena Football League it's all year!). Say what you want about the World Cup and Stanley Cup but annually Grey Cups are one of the biggest social occasions of the year. One would assume that it's pretty unlikely that everyone hasn't been exposed to our sport in one way or another over time. And yet, believe me – they exist.

Each year, the lines get longer and longer to sign up kids for minor football, and with them comes an increasing number of parents who have no idea what they are signing their kids up for. Most of the time, it's no big deal as both parent and child get to grow into the sport together, but based on the number of strange complaints were getting at the Football Alberta office lately, we thought it prudent to give coaches at that level a list of items to discuss with the newcomers to our sport to cut down on the potential misunderstandings that may affect a child's continuation in our sport.

A parent meeting at the beginning of each season is always a good idea. Sharing the coaching staff's philosophy, along with what to expect from the season can't hurt, but based on experience not everyone shows up at that meeting and usually it's the ones who need to be there the most that are absent. Therefore please print off the following list and at the very least present it to all first time parents along with a contact list of the coaches to clarify everything early. I'm sure you'd agree that agreeing to disagree politely with a parent in the pre-season is much better than a season long war or words with someone who just doesn't get it.

### **What to Expect from Football**

#### **1) Someone is going to hit your kid – and it's OK:**

"I can't believe they could do that to my child," is a popular refrain from some parents who call us up with concerns over tackling and hitting in a normal game. It's true, to someone who has raised their kids to not hit others the action at a minor football game can come as quite a shock. At it can be worse if they watch a practice where certain "pit" drills are designed to accentuate contact. But, it's OK. The equipment that the players wear is probably the best protective equipment in sport and a great deal of time is spent by the coaches on how to give and receive a hit properly. Football has its fair share of injuries, but no more than most other popular sports such as hockey, soccer, skiing, basketball, etc. We wouldn't offer this sport to kids if it was a true hazard to their health and we have over 100 years of history to back that up. Really – it's OK.

#### **2) Your kid may never see the ball – and it's OK:**

If you come from other ball or puck based, goal oriented sports you're probably used to the fact that at some point your child will touch the basketball, puck, or soccer ball. With a limited number of people on the court, field or ice essentially doing the same athletic movements it's inevitable that at some point there is going to be contact between your child and the implement of play. It's a slam dunk guarantee in baseball where everyone, regardless of their position, gets a turn at bat. In football – not so much.

Now, there is nothing sinister about this fact, it's just reality. Of the 24 positions on a field (12 on offense and 12 on defense) at any time during a game – only 7 of them are designed to carry or receive the ball. Plus, at the younger levels anyone tagged with a "receiver" position is infinitely less likely to get any love from the ball than someone with a "runningback" position. That does not mean that the other positions are useless or not important. That runningback will be going nowhere unless the offensive line does it's thing and does it well, and unless everyone with a defensive position works hard, your team is going to get a lot of points scored against it.

In short, football has many positions that are so disparate that we need all sorts of body

types in order to play this game. That is the beauty of our sport, but please understand that more than 2/3's of the players on the field are not supposed to get the ball unless a fumble or interception is at hand. Your child may be one of them but he/she still has an important job to do to ensure the teams success, so don't worry if they "get no touches" during a game. Really – it's OK.

### **3) Equal playing time is a myth – and it's OK:**

I know that statement may seem cold and cruel in today's "fun first" world of youth sports, but it's also the truth, so put away those stopwatches and understand why this happens.

Coaches will bend over backwards at the younger levels to make sure that everyone sees the field for a significant period of time. But, unless you have 48 kids exactly on the roster who fit perfectly into each position it will be impossible for each kid to play exactly one half. Usually minor teams will have 25-35 players so someone is going to wind up playing the whole game while other may see only a half of play or less. Plus, you may have a scarcity of large bodies and plethora of tiny fast kids which means there might be no back-ups along a lines of play while wide receiver might be three deep on the depth chart.

To make matters more unsettling for parents, particularly with a hockey background, there are no "shifts" in football. Once an offence is on the field they get to stay on as long as they are making first downs or until they score. This could be less than a minute or the majority of time in a particular quarter. That quarter might also be the one in which your child was scheduled to play linebacker for that team and spent most of it on the bench waiting. This can be a source of frustration if you do not understand that there is nothing a coach can do about that, and that he has the best intentions to get your child some significant playing time but the game might not work out that way. Relax, it may go in your favor next week when your child's team's defense is on the field all day (which isn't necessarily a good thing ☺).

Some leagues have built in equal time scenarios for the youngest kids (i.e. at the Atom level in Calgary it's 10 plays for your team then 10 plays for the other), but most don't, so if you see your child playing a regulation game and want to judge playing time – your in for a long frustrating day. Playing time is just one of many things a coach has to coordinate in a game. Trust that he'll do his best and just relax and enjoy the game. Really – it's OK.

### **4) You can't rotate positions – and it's OK:**

"My kid would like to try quarterback this week." Nothing can send shivers up the spine of a minor football coach more than hearing that from the father or mother of one of his offensive linemen. And it happens more than you think.

People don't usually start their kids in football until later on in a youth sport context (i.e. 10 years or older), whereas they may have had their son or daughter in soccer or hockey since they were 4. At the youngest levels of other sports it's quite common for kids to play right wing one game then defenseman the next, or even to go from catcher to shortstop between innings. That's because even though there are noticeable differences in those positions they are essentially doing the same thing (i.e. moving a puck or catching a baseball) and are similar enough to allow kids to experiment with most or all of the positions while learning the basic skills of the game.

Unfortunately the same is not true in football. While some positions, mostly on defense, have similar duties (i.e. tackling), most like quarterback and offensive lineman have completely different job descriptions and therefore have a completely different basic skill set and need to be instructed completely differently. This may help you understand why we have a large number of coaches with your child's team. There are at least seven different base positions (i.e. quarterback, runningback, receiver, offensive line, defensive line, linebacker, and defensive back) that need to have separate instructions.

Therefore, just like in other sports, it takes time and practice to pick up the basic skills, so moving around from position to position means that they will have to start all over again each time they move since the basic skills differ greatly from position to position and as a result will have a very hard time improving at anything. Again, as mentioned above, not everyone gets to do everything, but if you take the time to understand the team nature of the game and that no one person is successful without the 11 other players on field with him doing their jobs to the utmost, then you can relax when your told your child is a tight end or safety. Really – it's OK.

### **5) Baby, it's cold outside – and it's OK:**

With apologies to Dean Martin that statement is true as can be in these northern climes. Football is a sport that is played – plain and simple. Only extreme cold (like minus 30 type stuff) or electrical storms are supposed to stop the playing of it. Also – contrary to the way most City Recreation Departments operate their field usage – you’re supposed to play in the rain too.

This is hard for many people to wrap around their minds and believe me, we in the sport know how unpleasant it can be out there in our province, but again that is one of the beautiful things about our sport. You are not going to melt if you get rained on, and you won’t freeze either in the snow. Sports like baseball have to cancel in the rain because you cannot see or grip the ball properly in a downpour and that gets dangerous. Not in football, we can play it in any conditions. In a small way it’s a great learning experience to have to do something hard (i.e. laying down a block) in adverse conditions (i.e. rain). With so many character building opportunities being removed from the youth of today this is one we’re proud to remain with our sport. Plus, you need to understand that strategy learned in practice is infinitely more important in football than it is in more free flowing sports such as basketball or hockey. Therefore, your kid needs to BE THERE, or don’t even dream of complaining about lack of playing time.

Now, rest assured that on cold days most teams or leagues will take it upon themselves to provide heaters on the sidelines for players and coaches will properly instruct the players on how to dress for the cold. As well, yes, the fields do get harder and possibly icy when they freeze, but correspondingly the speed at which the game gets played slows down along with the force of the hitting. Remember, the players are wearing the best equipment to deal with contact that is available and that includes contact with the ground. Therefore, know that unless you’re notified in advance all practice and games will take place as scheduled come rain, sleet, snow and wind. Buy that umbrella and stock up on hand warmers early – because we live in Alberta, not California. Really – it’s OK.

#### **5) Things that look bad that aren’t – and it’s OK:**

Passing judgment on others is almost a cottage industry in the world of minor sports. Apparently most youth sports are crawling with unethical, mean spirited, no nothing coaches whose only desire is to demean and embarrass kids at any cost. Or, at least that’s what we hear. The truth is, obviously, that volunteer coaches are no more perfect than the next person, but realistically we feel they need to be given more of the benefit of the doubt than they have been in recent years. Again, it is probably due to lack of experience with the game that causes the misunderstandings that drive the complaints. This is not to say that there might be some legitimate complaints that have merit, but here are a few situations that may look a lot worse than they are and like we said above may need some benefit of the doubt given before calling in the cops:

**a) Yelling** – Let’s state it clearly right up front that profanity has no place in the game, regardless of the level of play. It is the refuge of a weak mind and by all means if your child’s coach is using it like an adverb you have every right to ask him to tone it down. However, this may not apply to yelling in general. Football is loud game by nature and with many player spread out over a large area the raising of voices comes naturally. Corrective statements, encouragement, instructions all can come across loudly and could seem rather brusque. This doesn’t necessarily make it bad. Yelling in the heat of battle may come with heightened emotions, but unless they are singling out your child with some choice words you can’t say on TV, let it be. It’s been a part of the game forever, & adds to the passion.

**b) Benchings** – So, what do **you** do with your child when he or she misbehaves? Coaches have few options when it comes to players stepping over the line either in their deportment on field or their behavior towards opponents, officials, teammates or coaches. The most popular of these options is “benching” or not allowing the player to continue playing. If you notice your child is in one of these situations, we’re not asking you to totally take the coaches side but simply think it through in that a coach wouldn’t take such drastic measures unless something truly untoward has happened. At the end of the day, he is responsible for the behavior and operation of the team – just like you are in your house with your family – so unless you want to be grilled every time you send a child to their room for misbehaving, cut the coach some slack and realize that there is more than likely a legitimate reason for his decision. Everyone loves their children but if you’re honest with yourself you’ll realize that they too are not perfect and entirely capable of making a mistake or choosing an inappropriate attitude (Lord knows mine do ☺). Talk with the coach if you

wish but a confrontational attitude will not make the situation any better. There may be many reasons for a child to not be getting onto on field up to and including having the player tell the coaches he doesn't want to play anymore (which happens more than you think at the Atom level). All we're saying is jumping to the conclusion that the coach "has it in" for your child is probably the least likely scenario taking place.

**c) Blowouts** – "That @#\$%& coach is running up the score against our team on purpose!" Happens all the time - right? One of the downsides to football is that blowouts do happen, and it's too bad but it is a reality. Sometimes, a coach or coaching staff will come along and develop a team into a well oiled machine. Add some talented players and you've got a juggernaut capable of scoring bundles of points and shutting out opponents at will. Due to the nature of the game, the numbers it takes to field a team and the short season there is very little "tiering" that can take place to balance competition that you might be used to in other sports. As a result there is normally only one level of play for your child's team, therefore you get to experience the good, the bad, and the ugly teams all on the basis of proximity. Therefore, there might be a 50-0 game on your horizon with the score not in your favor. What were asking for is that before you leap to a negative conclusion you may consider that the coach of the winning team in that circumstance might not be the devil you take him for. In fact – he just might be a very good coach doing a great job with the kids he's coaching.

Having said that, here are some thing to look for in a blowout situation that can give you a clue to whether the opposition (or in some cases your team), is doing all they can to keep the score differential from becoming worse. A good measuring stick is what happens once a team is up by 30 or more points in the second half. Are they:

- **Substituting freely?** The most noticeable subs will be a quarterback and runningback and should be of lesser talent than the starters.
- **Running in between the tackles?** What this means is, are their offensive plays run mainly between the ends of the offensive line where there is the best chance for the defense to limit the gain.
- **Punting on third and short?** Sure they could probably get the first down if they went for it with one or two yards to go, but instead they punt.
- **Not passing or taking any timeouts?** These are clock stoppers and prolong the game. Good coaches know this and will avoid this at all costs.
- **Calling off the dogs?** No more blitzing on "D".

It may well be that the scoring will continue because the subs that are now in the game are still going to be trying their best, however if you notice the above situations taking place it's best just to shrug and think about getting them next time, because the coach on the high end of the score is honestly doing what he can to keep things down. Now, if you notice that the starters are still on the field, the offense is passing like crazy and their bench is still cheering lustily once the score reaches 70-0 feel free to express your opinion, but normally the coach on the winning side of the ball is just a good man who has done a very good job developing a team. He shouldn't be demonized for being successful and nothing will be gained from organizing the rest of the villagers to take up pitchforks and torches against him. Sometimes you're the bug and sometimes you're the windshield. Take your child and some teammates out for a treat after the game and all will be forgotten. Really – it's OK.

In closing, it must be mentioned again that not everyone is perfect, and that includes you, me, and every coach your child will experience. As well, some coaches may have ways of operating their teams that you might find distasteful just in general. It happens, but as long as he has been up front about the way things are going to be (i.e. in regards to playing time, behavior expectations, etc.) and is following through on what he had said, nothing can be gained by a confrontation or complaint. If it's not your cup of tea your only two choices are to remove your child from the team or simply agree to disagree. Nobody gets into coaching to harm or demean kids. You wouldn't – so to assume that others would is kind of out there. So relax, enjoy the sport for what it has to offer. If your child is coming home each day claiming that he or she is enjoying the experience then don't sweat the small stuff. Join in, participate, rise and fall with the team and you won't regret it. Thanks for signing your child up to play and we look forward to having him/her as a part of our family!