

Coaches' Handbook

Challenger Football

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Preface

Sports for children that are disabled, sick, or otherwise unable to play in a regular sports program is nothing new. We at Berwick Youth Football League realize this, and we're not here trying to reinvent the wheel or claim to be the first in the nation to have a program like this. What we are trying to do, is make these children in every way, part of our program. They are no different than any other child in this organization; they play football, period. They will be treated like, and afforded the same opportunities as any other child in athletics. Many communities and organizations separate out their Challenger leagues from their other 'regular' sports programs. This does nothing but further alienate these children from their peers and the community. That's what we don't want.

Be Prepared

To be successful coaching any sport, at any level, it takes preparation. Running a Challenger program is no different. If you look at the rules for this level, it mirrors flag rules which we used early on as a frame work. It does not however, give you an idea of how a game really plays. This overview will give you some hints and tips as to what course a typical game will take, or how a typical game plays out from start to finish. It is assumed that the Challenger team is already part of a local football association which already has in place, all the basics. I am going to also assume you have at least ten players signed up and ready to go. If you only have nine, or let's say some days eleven show up, it doesn't make much difference, you can still have a game. Hopefully as word spreads, numbers won't be a problem, but early on, and in smaller markets it can sometimes be an issue. It would also be very worth while to sit down with the parents prior to the first game and go over this document and look for some feedback and help from the parents. They know their children best; listen to them. Prior to the first game make sure you have the basics in place. You should have a supply of belts, footballs (Officially approved, junior size), and of course an appropriately marked field. I found a field that was fifty yards long (seventy total) by forty wide worked the best. Anything bigger is too much for the kids. Keep the action as close as you can to the parents and fans, mark it accordingly, and make sure your on the regular game field (don't let anybody tell you that the wheel chairs will rip up the field because they don't). You don't want to be pushed off on to a practice field. The whole concept of this program is to make it just like a real game. There is however one important difference. No score will be kept, and keeping it free from competition makes it pure fun for these kids.

Game Day-Saturday Mornings

It didn't take too long to figure out that Saturday mornings were the best time to play. We have a very robust youth program in our area, and even though we have a good size flag division which also played Saturday mornings, we had no problem finding the Challenger kid's field time Saturday mornings. We are again this year playing at least one Friday night and one Saturday night game under the lights, because the kids loved it last year. But Saturday mornings were our bread and butter, it seemed like it worked best for most families, a couple of hours in the morning start to finish, and then they had the rest of the day to themselves. And of course there are no practices during the week. When it comes to the games, whatever you do, don't ask the parents what time works for them, you'll get twenty different answers. Get with your organization and set the schedule, the parents will get the kids there. The games usually take about 2 hours start to finish. We would get started about 10 and after the game and a snack we would usually be done a little before noon. Again, make sure the field is marked, and the concession stand and bathrooms are open before the kids start showing up, because once they do you will have to devote your entire attention to them. Remember, early on; recruit some help because you'll need it for refs, chain crew, etc.

Game Time

Okay, your field is set, the concession stand, bathrooms and press box are open, and the kids start streaming in...what now? Before the first game I was racking my brain trying to figure out how this whole thing was going to go down. I have been either playing or coaching football my whole life, but I was honestly concerned about how we would make this work. After most of the kids arrived we sat everybody down and went over how the game would play (or at least how we thought it would play). But I could see the kids getting anxious real fast, and it dawned on me if we were going to give these kids a real football experience, then I was going to treat them like any other football team I've ever coached. So we got out on the field and I started them on a drill that I use to get any other team warmed up and going, I made two lines each with a quarterback (have the coaches do this at first) and have the kids go out for some short passes. Some kids went out 15 yards some kids went out fifteen feet, I'd throw them a real soft pass(sometimes even

underhand) until they caught it and they'd run the ball back. The kids and the parents went wild! I knew right away that this was going to work. If a child has no use of his or her hands, have their helper catch it and then hand the ball to the child. Actually, we could have kept doing that all day long, the parents were clapping and hooting and howling with every catch and it was great for the kid's confidence, they realized pretty quickly too that they could do this. Besides the encouragement though, make sure you offer some instruction. Show them how to throw, show them how to catch, or carry a football, again just like a coach would do with any child, and I think you'll be pretty surprised. It won't take long before you see some good little ball players develop before your eyes. All these kids need is a chance. After about ten minutes of this, we circle everybody up for some stretching. Because a lot of the kids are in wheel chairs we did things they could all do. I would start them off just by clapping. By the way, like any kids, these kids love the rah-rah stuff. We'd just clap and I'd get'em revved up. You know the stuff, I'd yell out 'Let's Look like a Football Team out Here!' or 'What time is it? Game Time' the kids really eat that stuff up. But we would do neck rotations, a couple of different arm rotations, again just some light stuff. After warm-ups we would have the kids make their way to the sideline and get their belts (if a child is in a wheelchair their helper will wear the belt). At this point you should divide the kids into teams, get with the other coach and just split the teams (I hope it goes without saying you don't line them up and choose sides). We would usually have between twenty and thirty players show up. If it was twenty, we'd have two teams of ten or so each. If we got more kids we would have two games going simultaneously. We would keep the younger kids (10 and under) together and another game with for the older kids. It's a lot more fun for the younger kids if they can play with kids their own age and size. However, even the youngest kids did fine with the older kids, so if you don't have the numbers to have two games don't worry about it.

Pre-game Announcements, National Anthem, Coin-toss

If you want to give these kids a real football experience, do anything and everything you would do for a regular game. Line the kids up on the sideline after they have their belts and get an announcer to do introductions. They love hearing their name over the p.a. “At Quarterback, Number 12, Billy Smith” after they have run out to midfield, play the National Anthem. You can even have coin toss, just make sure you give different kids each a chance to be team captain(s). You can even have the announcer call the play by play. Again this stuff is lots of fun and it adds to the experience, try to fit it in.

Kick-off

Once you're ready to start we would have each team start about 10 yards from the goal line. I would then throw the ball to the other coach who would then hand it to a child and let him go. Make sure your ref's work the game like a regular ref, but with one big difference. There are no penalties, period. If a child does something wrong, blow a whistle, let them know what they did wrong and that's it. Put the ball back in play and keep going. Again, make it fun, like any other kid they are sensitive to making mistakes, so keep that in mind. Realize also that you have to get every player in the end-zone during the course of a game. So every drive is continuous, in that each drive will end with a touchdown (i.e. there are no turnovers). If you kept turning the ball over you'd never get the kids in the end-zone. We played (2) twenty-five minute halves with a ten or fifteen minute half-time. After the return we would huddle the kids up and start running plays. You'll find out real fast it's all about throwing the ball. I would do most of the quarterbacking and the play calling until I found a young man who just so happened to have down-syndrome that was a super ball player and could throw a football on a dime. As the game progressed I took less snaps and he took more. Don't do it all for these kids. I know that we often needed to catch a ball for a child in a wheel chair and then hand it to them, which is fine. But back away when you can and let them do it, they'll surprise you. That also goes for helping the kids on the field. Often times a parent or a sibling would be out there with a child leading them by the hand when they didn't need it. Like I said earlier, get the ball in their hands and let them go. You don't have to be in their ear 'run right or run left' after a couple of times they'll figure it out. We would also different times have people show up that wanted to help. That's great, but often times they didn't know football or more importantly they didn't have the experience or patience to help with the kids. You can however use these volunteers as ref's or announcers, or any of the other dozen things that need to get done on game day. Helping these children on the field is a big responsibility. It is important to understand that the helpers on the field are made aware of everyone's general safety. If a helper is pushing someone in a wheel chair they have to make sure they are cognizant of the safety of everyone. The wheel chairs have a lot of edges and angles that could hurt someone during the course of a game. Just make sure everybody is aware of the safety issues, and don't let anyone get too carried away. During the course of a game it is important to spread the ball around

as much as possible. It's also important to get every kid in the end-zone. It's not easy but it can be done. Make sure you run a huddle like a regular huddle. Of course I'd water it down, but I wanted these kids to get a real taste for what it's like. We'd call like 'load left, screen right, on one, on one, ready break' they caught on that we were flooding the left side and then we'd run a screen right. I ran reverses, half-back options, hook and ladders nothing is off the table. If you try to keep some of the terminology it makes it fun for the kids, and now when they watch a game they can say to their parents or friends "I know how to run a jet pattern" or "We run a reverse", this is the kind of stuff that helps to forge a bond with the game that you can only get from actually having played it. As the game progresses again keep making sure you spread the ball around evenly. Getting back to the continuous drives, you can have a chain gang and use the down marker but when fourth down comes up and they haven't scored just turn it back to first down and let them keep going. Just like offense, when it comes to playing defense, I like seeing the kids rotate around. Depending on how many kids show up, balance out how many are on the line of scrimmage. We would make the kids count to like '5 Mississippi' and then let them go. Because this is all about offense, if you get a kid that can blow things up, make him count higher or move him back into the secondary. Remember it's all about offense and making sure everybody scores a touchdown.

Everybody Wins

After the game we would line everybody up and do high-five's. The kids even liked doing that. Then we would provide a snack and as parents get together real quick if necessary. I have to say as a coach I have enjoyed every single second spent with these children. So when I say 'Everybody Wins', I mean it. To see the kids with a new sense of accomplishment that only comes from playing football goes beyond words. You can see these kids hold their heads a little higher because they are part of a football team, not a lot of people can say that. It was also great to see the look of pride from the parents at what these kids can do on the field given the chance. I hope if you can come away with one thing from this overview, it's that you as a coach need to be flexible. It's all about having fun, if you keep it free from pressure, free from competition, you can make this a great experience for everybody.