



Giving the Gift of Giving

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Sports news isn't always rife with salary disputes, drug scandals and arrests. Sometimes it just seems that way.

Which makes it nice when an e-mail comes across your computer screen reminding you that not everyone is in sports for the money, the glory or the ego gratification.

Reminding you that millions of kids play just for fun.

Reminding you that some coaches teach life skills, not just athletic skills.

Reminding you that some parents care for all children, not just their own.

It was a small gesture that the 6-year-old Shetland Pony Padres of the Murrieta Pony League made last month, but perhaps something that will ripple, and then ripple some more.

When it came time to collect money for Coach Brent Surman's end-of-season gift, team mom Kristin Rogers remembered a suggestion from the team parents meeting some months before.

"Instead of the usual gift certificates or some dinky thing that's not really worth much," she said, "the idea was to donate the money to charity."

The charity was Coaches Curing Kids Cancer, an off-shoot of an Atlanta-based non-profit called Curing Kids Cancer.

Rogers checked out the information and pitched it to the team parents.

"They thought it was a fantastic idea," she said of the \$100 collection. "I thought it was appropriate for Brent, too, because he's such a great coach. He's really positive with the kids.

"He's all about the idea of 'paying it forward,' like getting parents involved with the team and coaching so they pay it forward to next year's teams, too."

Surman, who does pool maintenance for a living and has been coaching for two years, didn't miss the restaurant gift certificates or the plaque he might have received.

"I'd much rather see the money go to something like this," Surman said.

One hundred bucks is a grain of sand when it comes to cancer research, but Surman liked the idea so

much he decided to expand on it. Now a board member, Surman said he will push for "the whole league to get behind it," not just the handful of teams that made a donation this past season.

"We've got about 50 teams," Surman said. "If we get 100 percent participation, it adds up. We can make a difference."

That's what Clay and Grainne Owen thought while their son, Killian, was battling leukemia a few years ago.

"One of our son's basketball coaches asked his parents not to get him a gift," said Clay Owen by phone from Georgia. "He asked them to donate the money to Children's Healthcare of Atlanta where Killian was being treated.

"That's where it started. We realized most coaches do it for the love of it, to teach kids about sports and sportsmanship. The gifts weren't important."

But money for research could be.

The Owens had already watched Killian go through chemotherapy and a bone marrow transplant before battling the government to approve an experimental drug for him. He was the first in the country to use it, but three years ago, at age 9, he died before its clinical benefits could be determined.

By then, Coaches Curing Kids Cancer was up and rolling, albeit small. The Owens oversaw its growth in the Atlanta region, then saw little pockets of support appear in South Carolina, Rhode Island and Dallas.

Owen said the charity first wrote a \$72,000 check last year to the Atlanta center, but he added that donations also have been made to research centers in San Diego, Seattle, Dallas, New Jersey and South Carolina, so that gifted money can stay somewhat local.

Owen said that more than \$150,000 will be made available this year. He said the organization, which paid no salaries, donated 67 percent of its total proceeds, slightly higher than the 60-40 benefits-overhead ratio minimum the Better Business Bureau recommends. He said the ratio should be higher this year because start-up costs have been paid for.

We'll have to take his word for it. The organization was too small to be rated by several Internet services that audit the largest of the country's thousands of charities.

But Coaches Curing Kids Cancer has been endorsed by the Aflac All-American High School Baseball Classic, a prep showcase game that will be played in San Diego on Aug. 12. Sponsors of the classic made a pledge of \$10,000 this year.

Owen said the charity tries to aid research centers working on "cutting-edge therapies. It was too late for Killian, but we know something good will come from our tragedy."

Of course, there are a lot of good causes, and maybe even causes more specifically appropriate or compelling for a particular league in a particular city. Wherever the money might go, coaches like Surman -- and there really are thousands -- truly appreciate a donation in their name.

"It drives home the point," said Surman, who doesn't even explain because he assumes you know.

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