

When I was growing up in Dubuque, there was one sport I loved playing more than any other: baseball. The only job I wanted as a kid had to involve baseball. Little league in Dubuque back in the 1970's was different than little league is now. Back then little league was sponsored by the Parks and Rec department of the City. Kids went to their nearest baseball/softball field and were put into teams and coached by local high school and college baseball players. When I was 15, I wanted that coaching job so badly that I worked as a volunteer coach the whole summer. This was even after I got cut from the sophomore baseball team.

Let me tell you a little bit more about that program. Kids from ages 8-13 played at their local park. 8-9 year olds played tee ball, 10-11 year olds played together as did 12-13 year olds. Kids showed up for 2 weeks of practice, and then the coaches divided them into teams with equal ability. Games were played Mondays through Fridays between 8:30 and 3:30. No uniforms, no matching hats, just kids playing semi-organized baseball coached and umpired by older kids. Every now and then a parent would show up and watch, which was no big deal.

I actually worked at that job for 3 summers, not counting my volunteer time. In my junior year of high school I actually did make the baseball team and earned a letter. As a senior I started for most of the year. My summertime life was pretty good; work coaching baseball from 8:30 – 3:30, then go play baseball in the evenings. The kids I coached were a lot of fun, and I never, ever got hassled by a parent. Throw in the added benefit of getting a great tan, and the only guys who even possibly had a better deal were lifeguards, but I don't think so. I was living a great baseball life.

This spring I have the privilege of coaching my 11 year old son Ben in Ankeny little league. When I agreed to coach Ben, I thought coaching kids would be just like it was 30+ years ago. I had helped assistant coach a couple of years ago, but I limited myself to pretty basic stuff. I knew being a head coach or "manager" would be more involved, but I wasn't really worried. Baseball doesn't change; coaching is just like riding a bike, some things you never forget. Right? Not exactly.

This year I found out exactly how much I didn't really know about coaching baseball. Some of the theories for pitching and hitting have changed. Since I wasn't a great hitter and didn't pitch much, I rely on my other coaches for help.

As small business owners and managers we have probably been doing our jobs for a long time. And to be successful, we needed to do a lot of things consistently correct. But techniques change, and even though the old way still probably works, we have to keep up on new ways to do our jobs and run our companies. We can accomplish this by staying active in trade organizations and listening to vendors when they offer new products and services.

Keeping hard and fast to the old comfortable way is like choosing not to use a computer or the internet simply because it is new and different.

After a few years in the “profession” of coaching baseball I realized that I was never going to be good at it enough to earn a living. On the other hand, nothing beats a beautiful spring night at the ball park with my kids. I even think they look pretty sharp in their uniforms and matching hats.

Small Business Today is a bi-weekly feature written by Tom Friedman, president of First National Bank, Ankeny.