

GIRLS ARE TWICE AS LIKELY TO QUIT YOUTH SPORTS, HERE'S 8 WAYS TO KEEP THEM IN THE GAME

The coaches at [Metro Lacrosse](#) are passionate about one particular rule: They want players, not parents to communicate with the coaches. The purpose of that edict, though, is not to silence but rather to empower. "We tell the kids to reach out to us directly. Forming this habit gives them the confidence to speak for themselves," says assistant director Hilary Renna. "We want to teach them to take the process into their own hands."

This is just one example of the ways that the leaders of Metro Lacrosse, a nearly-two-decades-old organization, think their responsibilities go beyond teaching proper cradling techniques. They believe that it takes a holistic effort to keep girls — who are twice as likely as boys to drop out of organized sports by age 14 — on the field. Their thoughtful approach is similar to the one you'll find at [Dodgers LAX](#), a girls' club in the Northeast and Florida. For the past 18 years, founder Dee Stephan has been equally intentional about how she supports her female players. Here, Hilary and Dee both offer actionable advice for fostering long-term female competitors.



01 Keep it positive.

"Kids participate in a sport because it's fun," Hilary says. Playing in a negative environment, of course, is not fun. Dee, who is the first to admit she expects a lot from her players, strives to use positive reinforcement even when she is yelling about passing sharper or shooting faster. When she or another of her coaches is particularly tough on a player, they follow up later to acknowledge the player's efforts. Dee also asks families that do not buy into the positive culture go elsewhere, even though she hates to punish their kids. "I just can't risk losing the intimacy we've worked so hard to create."

02 Create a sense of community.

At Dodgers, every new player is matched with a returning player or alumni member. Not only does this give the newcomers an easy connection, it fortifies the veterans too, because Dee's staff often pairs quieter oldtimers or those who need a confidence boost with the rookies. "I explain: 'Your job is to welcome the player, mentor them and make them feel part of something.' After I give them their assignment you can see the immediate shift in their body language," she says.

"It's about giving back to the game and becoming stronger women."

—Dee Stephan, Metro Lacrosse

03 Put them in charge.

Beginning in eighth grade, Dodgers are trained to become youth officials. "It's about giving back to the game and becoming stronger women," Dee says. "To stand on the field and officiate in front of obnoxious parents is not easy for adults, so it's especially challenging for a teenager. Being able to do it gives the girls so much confidence."

Dee wants that confidence to lead to a take-charge attitude at home, too. "Everybody knows if I say we start at 3, you better be there at 2:45. We know it's often the parents that make the kids late. I want them to navigate those situations too—whether it's telling their parents they need to be at the field by 2:30, or yelling at them to stop piddling around."

Hilary's Metro Lacrosse club gets similar empowering results by asking her girls to organize charitable fundraising efforts and their own goal-setting programs.

04 See them as more than lacrosse players.

On the second day of practice, each of the players on Metro's youngest team is required to arrive with a picture of herself doing something other than playing lacrosse. That picture gets placed in the back of a binder that stays with them throughout their Metro career: "It's a way to celebrate our different strengths," Hilary says. Toward that end, the club, knows the importance of encouraging [multi-sport play](#) and never penalizes a girl for missing practice because of commitments she may have to another sport.

06 Highlight role models.

Metro wants its younger players to know what's possible, so it showcases alumni on its regularly updated website and in social media posts. The staff also sends supportive and congratulatory emails to former players to keep the connections strong. Mini-newsletters celebrate former players' successes off the field as well. "We want to show that the skills learned at Metro are valuable in the workplace as well."

Dee hosts talks and seminars that give players a real-world leg-up, bringing in experts not only from industries like finance and engineering but also in the power of body language.

07 Celebrate success.

"We want to make sure that when Susie scores seven goals in a game, it's not 'Susie is a ball hog' but rather 'Wow, what an accomplishment,'" Hilary says. This is part of the club's intentional effort to shut down cattiness on the way to building a supportive environment. Coaches model that behavior by cheering loudly — and making sure the other girls get loud too — or by offering compliments in front of teammates on the sideline — and for more than goal scoring.

05 Hire female coaches.

You'd think this wouldn't need saying, but it does. For Dee, finding coaches for her all-female staff means recruiting any woman she thinks has potential. She's happy to provide the necessary mentorship. "Girls need to see strong women giving their time to the game," she says.

Metro finds most of its primarily female coaching staff in its alumni pipeline. (Another reason fostering strong relationships with players matters!) "Female coaches know what girls are going through and what they're thinking about," Hilary says.



08 Make it okay to make mistakes.

Dee knows that the best way to learn is by failing. The problem is society's perfectionist messages make girls mistake-avoidant. Which means her message is that much more important. When a player struggles with a new skill, Dee points out the challenges that player overcame to master another one. "Speedbumps, not dead ends," she says. Dee speaks too of her own failures, including the time she got cut as a junior from the varsity field hockey team and her father made her play JV. Two years later, she walked on at UConn — and won a national championship in her freshman year.

The goal of these tactics is to make female athletes feel appreciated and empowered. In the end, a league's most important responsibility is to make a lasting impact on the lives of its girls. Done diligently, it will add up to a strong and successful program too: a win-win.

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