



Photo by Anne Lang

Pony League baseball manager Eddie Lewis works with a player on hitting. Lewis feels that playing team

sports is a good way for youngsters to prepare for life. "It teaches kids about competition," he said.

GIVING KIDS A CHANCE

By Anne Lang
American-Statesman Correspondent

Pony League baseball manager Eddie Lewis wants to give kids the kind of start in life he never had.

As a youngster growing up in East Austin, Lewis wasn't aware of the existence of organized sports in his area, and though his childhood was not an unhappy or troubled one, he says he regrets not having the opportunity to play on a team.

"Team sports are good preparation for life," said Lewis, 45, manager of one of three North Austin Optimist Mustang league teams for ages 13-14. "It teaches kids about competition and the importance of respecting each other."

Parents, players and fellow coaches hold Eddie Lewis in high esteem for his extraordinary

commitment to not only coaching (he also coaches Optimist-sponsored football and basketball teams), but to the children's overall character development as well.

"So many kids today are just plain lazy," Lewis declared during a recent team practice at the NAO fields on Morrow Street. "They spend their time pushing buttons instead of exercising. Competition for a lot of them is limited to Nintendo games."

Lewis started coaching in 1984 for Lions-sponsored Little League. More than half of the 13 boys on his team have played for him every year since then. Lewis, who began coaching the Optimist team in 1987, was elected last year to the honorary position of NAO Vice-President for Youth.

"Eddie devotes almost all of his time to

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these kids," said NAO President Beverly Brown. "He puts them before anything else. He'll pick up a bunch of kids and bring them to the field himself, if that's what it takes to get them out there."

Lewis said he feels an obligation to ensure participation in organized. An engineering technician at Fisher Controls (valve manufacturers), Lewis collects soda cans at work and cashes them in to assist players who might have trouble paying their team fee.

"Team sports keep kids off the streets, away from drugs and away from home for a little while if their parents are abusing them," Lewis said. "It also helps keep them off

the gangs. I'm a firm believer that if you give kids a worthwhile pastime, that's going to put something else on their mind besides going and getting into trouble. And I think that's paying off."

When it comes to showing up for games, Lewis is nearly as strict with parents as he is with the players.

"I'll tell a parent, 'If you don't give your kid and the team support, I'm not going to play your kid,'" Lewis said. "So when you come to our games you'll see those bleachers filled. I get on those parents in a minute if the support's not there."

Team head coach John Arroyo confirms his, adding, "If you don't know Eddie, you might think he

comes on a little too strong. But he's a great motivator. He can put a smile on a kid's face pretty quick.

"His influence is evident not just on the baseball field, but off the field, too," Arroyo continued.

Team pitcher Andrew Wasko and catcher Auggie Leal, both 13, have played for Lewis since they were six years old. Leal said Lewis is not only a great coach, but "he also teaches us to stay away from drugs and things like that."

Married with two children (Erica, 9, and Brian, 13, a team member), Lewis admitted his coaching duties keep him away from home a great deal, but he feels it's time well spent.