

# You make the call

## Is it good baseball strategy or a weak attempt to win?

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Rick Reilly-Sports Illustrated

This actually happened. Your job is to decide whether it should have.

In a nine- and 10-year-old PONY league championship game in Bountiful, Utah, the Yankees lead the Red Sox by one run. The Sox are up in the bottom of the last inning, two outs, a runner on third. At the plate is the Sox' best hitter, a kid named Jordan. On deck is the Sox' worst hitter, a kid named Romney. He's a scrawny cancer survivor who has to take human growth hormone and has a shunt in his brain.

So, you're the coach: Do you intentionally walk the star hitter so you can face the kid who can barely swing?

Wait! Before you answer.... This is a league where everybody gets to bat, there's a four-runs-per-inning max, and no stealing until the ball crosses the plate. On the other hand, the stands are packed and it is the title game.

So ... do you pitch to the star or do you lay it all on the kid who's been through hell already?

Yanks coach Bob Farley decided to walk the star.

Parents booed. The umpire, Mike Wright, thought to himself, Low-ball move. In the stands, Romney's eight-year-old sister cried. "They're picking on Romney!" she said. Romney struck out. The Yanks celebrated. The Sox moaned. The two coaching staffs nearly brawled.

And Romney? He sobbed himself to sleep that night.

"It made me sick," says Romney's dad, Marlo Oaks. "It's going after the weakest chick in the flock."

Farley and his assistant coach, Shaun Farr, who recommended the walk, say they didn't know Romney was a cancer survivor. "And even if I *had*," insists Farr, "I'd have done the same thing. It's just good baseball strategy."

Romney's mom, Elaine, thinks Farr knew. "Romney's cancer was in the paper when he met with President Bush," she says. That was thanks to the Make-A-Wish people. "And [Farr] coached Romney in basketball. I tell *all* his coaches about his condition."

She has to. Because of his radiation treatments, Romney's body may not produce enough of a stress-responding hormone if he is seriously injured, so he has to quickly get a cortisone shot or it could be life-threatening. That's why he wears a helmet even in centerfield. Farr didn't notice?

The sports editor for the local *Davis Clipper*, Ben De Voe, ripped the Yankees' decision. "Hopefully these coaches enjoy the trophy on their mantle," De Voe wrote, "right next to their dunce caps."

Well, that turned Bountiful into Rancorful. The town was split -- with some people calling for De Voe's firing and describing Farr and Farley as "great men," while others called the coaches "pathetic human beings." They "should be tarred and feathered," one man wrote to De Voe. Blogs and letters pages howled. A state house candidate called it "shameful."

What the Yankees' coaches did was within the rules. But is it right to put winning over compassion? For that matter, does a kid who yearns to be treated like everybody else *want* compassion?

"What about the boy who is dyslexic -- should he get special treatment?" Blaine and Kris Smith wrote to the *Clipper*. "The boy who wears glasses -- should he never be struck out? ... NO! They should all play by the rules of the game."

The Yankees' coaches insisted that the Sox coach would've done the same thing. "Not only wouldn't I have," says Sox coach Keith Gulbransen, "I didn't. When their best hitter came up, I pitched to him. I *especially* wouldn't have done it to Romney."

Farr thinks the Sox coach is a hypocrite. He points out that all coaches put their worst fielder in rightfield and try to steal on the weakest catchers. "Isn't that strategy?" he asks. "Isn't that trying to win? Do we let the kid feel like he's a winner by having the whole league play easy on him? This isn't the Special Olympics. He's not retarded."

Me? I think what the Yanks did stinks. Strategy is fine against major leaguers, but not against a little kid with a tube in his head. *Just good baseball strategy?* This isn't the pros. This is: Everybody bats, one-hour games. That means it's about *fun*. Period.

What the Yankees' coaches did was make it about them, not the kids. It became *their* medal to pin on *their* pecs and show off at *their* barbecues. And if a fragile kid got stomped on the way, well, that's baseball. We see it all over the country -- the overcaffeinated coach who watches too much *SportsCenter* and needs to win far more than the kids, who will forget about it two Dove bars later.

By the way, the next morning, Romney woke up and decided to do something about what happened to him.

"I'm going to work on my batting," he told his dad. "Then maybe someday *I'll* be the one they walk."

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