Benching the Starter

After I stepped away from playing baseball following my junior year of high school, I had the privilege to serve as a coach for a middle school little league baseball team. The team I had drafted was fairly decent on paper, but the chemistry built as the season progressed made this group of young baseball players a truly exceptional team. The team was undefeated in the regular season and seeded first in the payoffs. After quickly marching through the playoff bracket, we found ourselves scheduled to play in the championship game. Although it was a team effort to get to that playoff spot, it was clear that our star pitcher, Thomas Simpson, had carried the weight of the team, winning every game he pitched in over the course of the season. Three days prior to the championship game, we had our final practice to get the final reps in before the game. An hour into practice, Thomas showed up carrying a bag of fast food with no excuse as to why he was late. The rules laid out at the beginning of the year clearly stated “If you are to show up late to/miss practice without an excuse, you will sit the next game.” Obviously this situation gave me, as the coach, a very tight ethical dilemma to deal with. I had two options. I could stick true to rules laid out at the beginning of the season, treating Thomas as an equal member of the team. On the contrary, I could let him play, for I knew that his teammates were counting on him to help us win the game. It was pretty clear that if he did not pitch, we most likely would not win. If any other member of the team had done what Thomas had done, there would have been no question that they would be sitting for the championship game. As I spent the next day trying to make a decision, I received numerous e-mails and phone calls from parents letting me know that it would be ok to play Thomas. I sat there trying to decide whether I should do what is best to make the season a success by winning the championship or whether I should do what is best by making an example out of Thomas. After long contemplation, I decided to sit Thomas for the championship game. After I let him know, word quickly spread throughout the team and I again was bombarded with frustrated parents claiming that this was the championship game. My response to each parent and reasoning behind my decision was that these boys would gain more from a strong ethical lesson experienced firsthand, rather than a first place trophy. I was sure that those boys would take much more away from the season with a strong understanding of the importance of following rules and staying true to your word, rather than a win in the final game. We ended up losing the championship game by one run, and met as a team one last time after the game. I told them I was proud of them and that I hoped they took away some fundamental baseball skills, but more importantly the life lessons they had learned along the way. Following the season, I received a letter in the mail with a short note from the boys on the team. The note that stuck out to me most was from Thomas. He said “Thank you for a great season coach. I learned how to pitch much better than before, but a lot about life. I came away from this season a better person and I want to say thank you for sitting me that last game. It helped me learn a good lesson in life.” Now, having talked about ethics in class, I feel confident that I made the right decision by sitting Thomas in the final game. Although we did not win the league and advance to the state playoffs, I was confident that the boys would be stronger men because of the ethical decision I made.