



FAMILY *Matters*

How To Be A Good Sport Parent

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After 20 years of experience as an athletic coach and over 30 years of experience as a sport and performance psychologist, I have had the chance to observe parental behavior and the effect it can have upon athletes and performers. During this time, I have seen a significant increase in parental pressure placed upon athletes to perform. While helping children achieve their potential athletically and personally is an excellent idea, the manner in which some parents approach the situation is of concern.

I recall attending a soccer tournament where I observed a father publicly belittling his son. After the forceful and bitter verbal attack, his son responded, “dad I hate you.” So, what then was the purpose of this type of interaction? It would appear to be a misguided attempt to motivate his child. In my work with athletes at Olympic through youth levels, this type of damaging interaction often occurs in the much-dreaded car ride home. In a recent high-performance mindset workshop for an elite New Jersey soccer organization, I only agreed to do the workshop if the parents were also present. My view is that any high-performance advice I could give the athletes could easily be undone by adverse parent-athlete interaction. In this workshop attended by over 200 parents and athletes, I specifically role-played the parent during a typical dreadful car ride home. I did my best to bestow a litany of the typical verbal

attacks athletes have reported to me. At the end of the demonstration, many parents were aghast because they saw themselves in my demonstration, which certainly was the goal. When I processed the experience with the volunteer athlete, my role-played parental behavior was perceived as demoralizing, punitive, unmotivating and anger generating. The volunteer athlete indicated that she would be distracted by thinking about the adverse parental behaviors while on the field which is counterproductive to high-performance.

So, what motivates parents to do this? Typically, the pursuit of future college scholarships and achieving selection to elite status athletic teams is at the core in my experience. At times, in part, because this pursuit allows parents to live vicariously through their athlete’s achievements. According to the NCAA website, only about 5% of athletes continue their competitive participation in sport in college and only about 2.5% are eligible for athletic scholarships. It is important to note that even if an athlete achieves Division I participation, it does not always guarantee financial compensation.

Watch this video where youth athletes explain what they really want from their parents. Go to the ilovetowatchyouplay.com and search for the “kids tell us the truth about sports parents” video. The video message is clear, athletes want their parents simply to cheer them on.

So, what should good sports parents do?

- Relax and keep sports fun and focus on skill improvement not winning.
- View sports as a way to develop healthy exercise habits, social skills and life skills.
- Refrain from shouting instructions or giving guidance in the middle of an athletic event because it is distracting and usually embarrasses the athlete.
- Don’t micromanage your child’s performance rather let your child be coached by the coach even if you don’t agree with the coach’s approach. This can develop valuable life skills.
- If you have problems managing your emotions as a parent, do not discuss the athletic event for 24 hours and in particular avoid the car ride home conversation.
- Help children self-assess their performance and participate in a self-directed goal-oriented improvement plan.
- Seek the services of a sport psychologist if you as a parent find it difficult to manage your emotions and/or your child is having performance challenges.

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