

A Game Plan for Mom and Dad

How to Help Parents Have a Great Athletic Experience

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Coaches who are preparing their basketball team for the season will be wise to extend their responsibilities to another group of major players—the parents. They too are striving to assure their kids of a glorious season—athletically, socially, and career-wise.

The parents we normally work with develop a passion for helping their kids perform at their highest level, both on and off the court.

What I would like to do is offer a coach's view on how the parents can maximize their impact during the season and make it perhaps the best year of the children's careers

We would also like to dig into the hearts and minds of the coach and players to learn how they can effectively communicate and to realize that the coach is a public figure who can make the pre-season a glorious time in which to build lifelong relationships among coaches, players, and parents.

No coach wants to lose. In fact, his job depends on winning. Several times in my career, I have had teammates with whom I had virtually nothing in common, and whose life styles and apparent priorities I did not appreciate.

None-the-less, they were among our best players and consequently played absolutely as much as their performance warranted.

Apart from discipline and violation of team rules, I do not know any coach who will keep

a player on the bench because he doesn't like him—so long as the player can help him win.

Parents have to understand that coaches don't enter the profession to cheat the kids. They usually go into coaching to impact lives, not hurt or destroy them.

What coaches would like parents to know and understand.

Having coached at the high school, college, and professional levels of basketball during a 17-year-coaching career and also being the son of a coach, I have spent my entire life around them.

It is my belief that coaches would like the parents to know a few things about them and the jobs they do. To begin with, coaches make their decisions based on winning, first and foremost—not on whom they like or dislike.

The next thing that coaches would want you to understand is that playing time and style of play are determined after careful evaluation of numerous practices and countless hours of watching film. Parents and fans do not see the total picture. For example, the last two minutes of a lopsided game when a player comes off the bench and hits back-to-back three-pointers is not normally a true indicator of the player's skill—he probably has proven his lack of skill throughout many shooting drills and scrimmages, hence the sparse playing time.

Also, the best team is not always the five most talented players. Team chemistry, role playing, specific match-ups and game plans often determine the five players on the court.

We need only look at the past Olympic and World Championship basketball competitions to prove that the five most talented players do not always make the best “team.” Just because your son or daughter can beat one of the starters one-on-one doesn't mean he or she should be starting.

A coach considers many things in determining to who gets to play. The legendary John Wooden played the kids whom he thought “worked best within HIS idea of the team concept”.

Obviously, coaches use both tangible and intangible criteria to determine playing time. Intangible criteria would include things like coachability, hustle, attitude, punctuality,

work ethic, commitment and attention to detail. These intangibles are certainly factors in coaching decisions.

It is vital to understand that parents cannot be truly objective in evaluating their son or daughter's ability and performance. Even my dad, a former college head coach, couldn't accurately see my weaknesses. Neither can I clearly see my children's flaws.

Parents love their children and look to see what's best for a son, while the coaches look to see what's best for the team.

John Wooden frequently assured the players and parents that he "ALWAYS acts in the best interest of the *team*."

Effective and healthy parent-child communication:

The second concept that I believe impacts the athletic experience is the parent's ability to effectively communicate with his child. The most important thing to communicate to his child, especially right after a game, is unconditional love.

There are plenty of critics out there. In fact, immediately after the game, coaches will critique the team and some individual players in the locker room.

The fans give constant feedback on the son or daughter's play by way of applause, boos, or perhaps non-verbal expression.

The media will also grant unsolicited critiques of your child for thousands of others to hear or read. Your child has to know that you love him regardless of his performance. This unconditional love will impact your child more than any clever, insightful critique you might convey.

As a parent, however, you do have an important message to deliver your child. It concerns his behavior during a game. The coaching staff may be so into the game that it will miss the child's reaction when he is removed from the game for a trash-talking burst away from the live play or for a disrespectful response to an official.

The parent has the responsibility for his child's unsportsmanlike behavior. If the child doesn't pay attention during the time-outs or plays around the bench, it most certainly has

to be brought to his attention. The parent has to understand that the child has the potential to destroy a team's morale by his words to the child away from the gym.

Any words spoken negatively about the coach will most certainly impact the son or daughter. Whether the parent realizes it or not, he has a position of great influence on his child. If he says the coach is "no good" or that he made an awful decision or that he is cheating the child, etc., that will stick with the child and instill disrespect and hinder the son's coachability and enthusiasm.

Have you ever walked into a room where someone was talking behind your back? You may not have heard a single word spoken, but deep down you knew that they were talking about you.

When you as a parent speak negatively about the coach you create a negative climate or spirit. The coach may not know exactly what is going on, but he'll feel something isn't right and in the end the child will suffer.

If you care about your child, you will NOT speak negatively about the coach, especially to your child.

A player being able to *trust* the coach and the coach being able to *trust* the player is an overlooked, yet significant factor in a successful season—negative words destroy the element of player-coach trust.

This concept applies to a parent's words about the other players on the team. If the words are derogatory (addressed to another player on the child's teams), you can bet that your son is going to speak to that player in the same fashion.

It's one thing to say that so-and-so didn't shoot well or play well. It's another thing to say that he is awful and shouldn't be playing.

Every season provides many "teachable moments" for parents.

It is true that a parent should strongly support the decisions of the coach and should not do any coaching from the stands, but there is an area in which a parent has to "coach," and that is in the area of teaching life skills.

Regardless of whether the events in the season are good or bad, there can be excellent “teachable moments” for a parent who is looking at the big picture.

If your child is on the bench and is playing only a few minutes, you have to teach him the concept of finding a way to contribute to the team. He can do this working hard in practice, cheering on the team during games, staying focused during the game so as to be prepared if and when his chance comes.

Everything that happens during a season can help prepare your child for potential situations in the game of life.

For example, if the coach happens to be a “yeller”, well, as the parent, you can prepare him to listen to *what* is said and not *how* it is said. Or, if the team is losing and your child feels like giving up, you can teach him that some day he may be in a marriage that is not going well, but that if he will just keep trying to work out things, he may turn them around.

As a parent, you have a major role in helping your child grow and mature. The season can give you some tremendous teaching tools—if you constantly stay aware of the bigger picture.

Remember this quote from my Hall of Fame football coach (and father-in-law), Dick Dullaghan, “It is not what you get for playing, but what you become because you played that is most important.”

The parents of an athlete are really public figures:

The third major concept to keep in mind as a parent of an athlete is that you are a public figure. In my years as a college basketball recruiter, I would often go into high school gyms, and, invariably, someone would ask me who I was there to recruit.

After I would tell them, they would almost always point out where the parents of the player I was recruiting were sitting. Most of the fans know everyone.

As a parent, you will not only be known by the public, but will be perceived as an expert on the issues affecting the team. Anything you say in the stands or around town will be taken as the truth and will be repeated with your name attached for credibility.

If you bash the coach or even quietly agree with someone criticizing him, you can be pretty confident that it will make its way back to the coach. Furthermore, your non-verbal expressions in the stands will be observed by people around you. If you throw up your hands when another player misses a jump shot or turns the ball over, know that that person's parents and friends will see it. Self-control is always a big challenge during a game.

You also need to resist the temptation to respond to the negative comments made in the stands. The nasty comments are often spoken out of jealousy or ignorance. If you respond, you risk causing a scene.

Having coached in the NBA, the high major D1 level, and also the high school level, I know that anything involving family members before or during a game will negatively impact the player.

I strongly suggest that you act as though you didn't hear the negative comments or get up and move seats, but don't let your son or daughter catch you in an argument.

As I mentioned, I have been in countless gyms as a neutral observer and have seen some ridiculous actions performed by normally sane parents.

If a player could see how foolish he looks screaming at the officials for a call (that often isn't really that bad), you wouldn't do it. Yelling at the refs honestly doesn't help anyone's cause and sometimes actually hurts the player and the team.

At times, I'd watch a parent of some kid I was trying to recruit and who is making a fool of himself and I'd wonder whether I really wanted to deal with that parent for four years.

By yelling at the refs, the parent gives his son an excuse for not playing at his best.

On the positive side a parent has the opportunity to support the other players on the team and to be a witness of unselfishness and caring. When a parent supports the team regardless of how much his child plays or how well the team is playing, it makes a tremendous statement on the coach staff and other parents.

I have seen the other way, too. For example, a parent travels to every game and is very

enthusiastic, etc., but as soon as his son's minutes get cut or he is injured and can't play, the parent is nowhere to be seen.

This sends a message to the other parent and the players: The parent's concern was for his kid, not the team. If you want to contribute to the program, then it has to be about the team, not just about you and your son.

A tremendous time to enrich the parent-child relationship

The final point I'd like to make is for the parent to enjoy this "season of life" with his child. Try to make this time special, for it ends so quickly. Every step up the ladder—from elementary to junior. high/middle school to high school to college to the pros—eliminates thousands and thousands of players who would like to be on a team, but get cut.

The parent should be grateful that his son has a spot on the team, regardless of how little he offers. It's so important for the athlete for his parents to be at the game—far more important than he might let on.

You should see how the players on the college level fight for their parents' tickets for the games.

Personally I know how good it felt to have my parents at the games. If we lost or I played poorly, it was so comforting to see a caring face. The old saying applies: "Family multiplies the joys and divides the sorrows." Take every opportunity to help multiply the joy of the athletic experience and divide your child's sorrows through it.

Finally, don't let playing time, losses, or difficult moments steal the joy of being actively involved in supporting a son or daughter. When I played basketball at Miami (OH) University, one of my teammate's dads exemplified this concept of enjoying the experience and it not only blessed his son but all of us on the team.

My teammate, Jeff Fuerst, sometimes started and sometimes didn't even get into the game during our freshman year.

For some parents, this would have caused them to be angry with the coach ("How could my son play so well last game and not even play this game?"), Not Jeff's dad—he was

upbeat, supportive, and positive to Jeff, the coaches and the rest of the guys on the team, regardless of how or if Jeff played.

I honestly looked forward to seeing Mr. Fuerst at the games. He lived in Chicago, which was quite a drive to Oxford, Ohio, but when he couldn't make the weekday games, he would drive around Chicago until he could get to a place where he could in tune in the game on his car radio (through the static!)

Let me tell you, Mr. Fuerst made the most of the experience and consequently helped his son maximize the joy of being part of a basketball team.

My hope and prayer for you and your son or daughter is to cherish the opportunity to experience this season of life together. This season never lives long enough, so make it the best it can possibly be!