

This past summer, I gained some valuable insight from Bruce Brown, a highly sought after national speaker on athletic and character education topics. After 30 years of coaching, teaching, and working with young people from junior high to college age, he has gathered and researched some eye-opening information that changed my way of thinking about my role as a coach, parent, and spectator. Through my own experience as a coach for 20+ years and a parent I know these concepts are true and if applied, can make for a wonderful athletic experience for both you and your child.

## **The Role of Parents in Athletics**

A successful experience for the athlete involves the communication triangle between the parent, athlete, and coach. If handled correctly with both parent and coach working together for the benefit of the athlete, the athletic experience can be extremely positive. Parents must also realize and be aware that there is a delicate line between support/ encouragement and interference. Everyone in the process, coaches and parents alike, must always remember that kids' needs come first.

### **Goals and Roles**

Parents, ask yourself the following questions:

- Do you want them to play? If so, why?
- What will be a successful season for you as a parent?
- What are your goals for them?
- What do you hope they gain from the experience?
- What do you think their role will be on this team?

Then ask your child the following questions and just listen without talking.

- Why are you playing?
- What is a successful season?
- What goals do you have?
- What do you think your role will be on the team?

Once the parents have heard the answers and responses, if both sets of the expectations are the same, great. If the answers are different then the parents need to change or reevaluate their attitudes and accept it from their child's perspective.

Remember these facts:

- 95% of kids play sports for the fun, joy and love of the game.
- 70% of all young people are done competing in a team sport activity by age 12.
- There are 100 academic scholarships, given to every 1 athletic one.

### **Share Expectations**

Many athletes relate their feelings that their parents do not understand their team roles and most parents always feel that their child's role is larger than the athlete knows it to be. This situation often turns into frustration and second-guessing, and frequently puts the athlete in the middle between coach and parent. This is a position where the athlete can only lose.

### **Release them to the game**

Parents should get to know their child's coach and once trust is established one of the best gifts parents can give their children is to release them to the caretakers of their child's sport. If a parent feels the

need to talk to the coach about a problem, he should allow the coach to choose an appropriate time and place. With regard to such problems, some concerns are appropriate, while others are not.

Appropriate concerns to discuss with a child's coach are:

- mental and physical treatment of your child
- ways to help your child improve
- concerns about your child's behavior

Inappropriate areas of concern that parents should not discuss with their child's coaches include:

- playing time
- team strategy or play calling
- other team members

By releasing their athlete to the game and coach, parents are telling them that all successes are theirs, all failures are theirs, and all problems are theirs. There are not many places in a young person's life where their parents can say: "This is your thing". This can't be done with many things in your child's life but it can be done in athletics. The dilemma for most adults is that it is easy for them to see solutions in athletic situations and too difficult for adults to let their children find their own solutions. Athletics is the best place for young people to take risks and fail. Is there a better place for a kid to take a chance and fail than on the field or court? Parents don't want their kids to take risks with cars, drugs, or sex. On the other hand, no downside exists for allowing a young athlete to take a risk and fail in a game or practice.

**Red flags** for parents that have not released their kids to the game:

- continuing to live his personal athletic dream through his child
- taking credit when the child has done well
- trying to solve all his child's athletic related problems
- trying to continue to coach his child when the child probably knows more about the game than the parent does
- taking everything too seriously... if nervous before child's game, having difficulty recovering from a loss, making mental notes during the game so he can give advice later, becoming verbally critical of an official
- athlete avoid parents after the game or embarrassed about parents involvement
- athlete focused on his parents in the stands for approval or out of fear, not on the game

**What athletes need from their parents:**

- The single most important contribution a parent can make during a game is to model appropriate behavior. What parents need to model more than anything is poise and confidence. If parents expect their children to react to the ups and downs involved in a game with poise, then they must model it. If an athlete looked at his parents during the game, would he draw confidence, assurance, and poise from what he saw?
- The second responsibility athletes say that they need their parents to fulfill is to focus on the team. This focus helps adults not only get attention off their individual child, but also off all the things that are not in parents control (i.e. the score, the referees, the opponents, coaching, and playing conditions).
- Thirdly, kids need only one instructional voice offering advice during the game...the coach's voice.

## Learning how to watch the game

- There are only four roles during a game: spectator, competitor, official, and coach. Choose only one of these roles.
- The closer the parents are in proximity, the more difficult it is to watch and keep everything in perspective. Judgement is involved in every sport, but not nearly as much in an objective sport, like swimming or track, as in basketball where every referee's whistle could go either way and substitutions by coaches are frequent. Each whistle and every substitution can be questioned by anyone in attendance; thereby making it more difficult for an adult with emotional ties to the contest to remain poised and encouraging. Almost all parents believe that their child should play more or have a bigger role on the team. As such, it is very difficult for parents to be objective. Coaches, on the other hand, can be objective.
- Players indicate that they love to have parents at games when they act appropriately. If they cannot adhere to reasonable standards of behavior concerning modeling, poise, and confidence many athletes' state that all factors considered, they would rather have their parents stay home.

## After the game

- When it comes to recalling their least-enjoyable memory, many athletes will name "after the game" and often specifically "after the game in the car with my parents." This situation is when the most confidence cutting, confrontation, and confusion occurs for the athlete. Unfortunately, some high school athletes do not want to go home after the game because they do not want to face the questioning or criticism. What they need most at these times is not another coach, but a parent (i.e. "just be my dad").
- Many athletes often indicated that conversations with their parents after a game have somehow made them feel as if their value as a person was somehow tied to playing time or winning or losing athletic contests.
- Most athletes desperately want their parents to give them time and space at the end of the game. The more competitive the athlete and the more competitive the sport, the more time and space the players need.
- Parents should leave their children alone until they are receptive to interaction with them, and then when they do come, parents should give them quiet understanding, be a reflective listener, and bring them back to the bigger perspective.

When parents stop and analyze the athletic experience for their children, the reasons they want they want their kids to play sports involve providing an opportunity to develop physically and emotionally and to enjoy themselves. The side benefit of playing sports is that kids are given a good opportunity to learn how to work and get along with others, to take risks in a public arena and survive, to learn to set and achieve goals by developing positive work habits, to learn how to succeed and fail with dignity, and to develop friendships that can last a lifetime.

**Information gathered from Bruce Brown's Video "The role of parents in athletics" and his book "Teaching Character Through Sports"**

**For over 30 years, coach and teacher Bruce Brown has asked his teams from every level (middle school through college) the following questions. Here are some of their responses.**

**What are the things parents do to embarrass their kids!**

- Trying to teach me how to do something "correctly" after the game
- Coaching during the game even though you aren't the coach
- Telling me what I was doing wrong after every game
- Being asked to leave the field by an official
- Going crazy at the refs—because that is not your job. It is the coaches job to question the bad calls
- Taunting other players, opponents, refs
- Yelling things at the coaches
- Acting disappointed with what I am doing instead of reassuring me that I will do better next time
- Don't say, "(nickname), you look really cute in your uniform, honey", and hug me!

**What things do parents do that their kids really appreciate!**

- Taking time out of your busy schedule to come to games and support me
- Bringing snacks after the game
- Supporting the whole team not just me
- Cheering the team even when losing badly
- Telling them they did a good job
- Being proud of them even when they didn't win
- Being quiet unless cheering with everyone else
- Never yelling at a coach or ref
- Making friends with the other parents

**Advice from kids to you, the parents!**

- Don't get frustrated if your kid isn't playing well or the team is losing
- Don't become too involved in our sports lives
- Stay in the stands and know your role
- Encourage regardless of performance
- Kids don't tolerate parents trying to get their kid to play. It should be between the player and the coach
- If I don't play, don't be angry with me or the coach
- Relax and let the kids have fun
- Don't make a scene remember it is your child's team
- It is not a life or death situation; it is just a game