

Letting Kids be Kids

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We all know them, don't we? "Those" parents -- the ones no one wants to sit with in the bleachers because they're so irritating. Recognize any of these folks?

A young basketball coach has to call his own father for advice after he struggles with a "bleacher dad" who persists in coaching his son from the sidelines. The poor player is a nervous wreck by the end of each game, between trying to follow his coach's directions and hearing his dad's constant from-the-side input, which is sometimes contrary to what the coach has told him to do. Finally, the coach pulls the dad aside and tells him that he needs to stop, that he's damaging his son's nerves and undermining the coach's authority. After being chastised by the coach, the dad makes a large show during games of folding his arms, pressing his lips and not saying a word, but the drive home from each game is a play-by-play rundown of what the kid should have done during the game.

A baseball coach is enthusiastically supportive and encouraging to all of the players, except his own son, who is a strong, but erratic pitcher. When other players come up to bat, the coach is there to high-five them as they leave the field, whether they hit well or strike out. When his own son is up to bat or is pitching, however, Coach Dad is a study in disgust and frustration, rolling his eyes at any error, sighing deeply, shouting, "Oh, come on," when his son fails to strike out a pitcher or make at least a base hit. Coach Dad has placed such impossibly high expectations on his son that his son inevitably becomes rattled and makes even more mistakes than ever.

A track team member's parents are certain their daughter can become the next big thing; she just needs to work harder, receive better coaching, get leaner. They hire personal coaches to work with her, enroll her in summer camps to train and tell her if she would just push herself harder, she'd be a star. She isn't allowed to attend a friend's midnight bowling party because she has to be up early to train the next day. Track Girl does everything she's told to do. She also throws up before every meet and secretly writes long poems about frustration, weakness and worthlessness.

They're Just Kids

wish I could say these scenarios are fiction, but they are simply fictionalized versions of all-too-common examples of parents who place far too much emphasis on their children's athletic achievements. What is the cause of this overemphasis? First, it can stem from the parents' own attitudes, either they were successful and driven athletes who want to see the same from their own children or they are frustrated "weekend warriors" living out their own dreams of glory through their children.

Competitiveness is introduced far too young in many sports. Aspiring players are either cut or relegated to the bench while their bodies and their abilities are still developing. Even the children who will never grow into athletic success need to be given the opportunities and encouragement to find personal bests, to experience small successes, to feel part of a team. One of the most rewarding sights for parents is to see the interplay among teammates when it's done right -- kids who may not actually socialize with each other usually, who may not even like each other, can really warm your heart when you see them supporting each other on the field, the track or the court. Being a fair,

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supportive, equal part of a team can be superb preparation for all kinds of things life will bring as children grow into adulthood and take their places in society. Taught properly, by coaches and parents, every member of the team can be made to feel that he or she has the responsibility to look after the good of the team, to make his or her best contribution and to be unfailingly respectful of his or her teammates.

In the meantime, kids still need to be kids. They need to play. They need to be praised for trying their best and for putting themselves "out there." In no other part of their childhood do we expect them to have adult motivations and success, but too often, in the sports arena, we expect just that.

As parents and coaches, we have been entrusted with the incredible gift and awesome responsibility of being part of the "making" of the men and women whom our children will become. They have the rest of their lives to learn to absorb the hits of losing and the thrills of winning; how about a little consideration while they are young?

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