

Volume 1. The Athlete Development Series

A Game Plan For Athletes

Team Up With Mom and Dad

**How to Strengthen
Your Relationships With Your Parents**



DAVID CANNING EPPERSON, PH.D.

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A Guidebook for Your Children

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The Opportunity Expanding Sports Collection

This is one in a series in the Opportunity Expanding Sports Collection. Each volume addresses issues related to the challenges of creating opportunity expanding team communities. These booklets are aimed at accomplishing three objectives:

- To inspire you to reflect on whether your current way of playing your sports parenting role is having the desired results.
- To provoke discussion between you, athletes, coaches, and other parents about how you can work together to create an opportunity expanding team community.
- To challenge you to consider taking actions that will lead to the pay-offs you seek from your investment in your children's life in sports.

Most parents have not yet considered the full range of benefits to their children and their families from their sports programs. They have not been challenged to expand their consciousness, values, attitudes and skills so that they can become Savvy Sports Parents. In the main, parents have not been inspired to:

- Engage in self-assessment to discover the level of development of their ability to manage the inevitable frustration and anger that arises in the normal course of athletic competition.
- Explore alternative solutions to common challenges in their team community that take attention off individual performance and place it instead upon achieving benefits for everyone - parents, athletes and coaches
- Complete an analysis of those factors that interfere with their own ability to become deeply involved in what they are doing in their team community,
- Develop a plan of action for facilitating the dreams of their sports mates - the parents, athletes and coaches on their children's team.
- Develop a design for a team community that can open up opportunities for parents, athletes and coaches to be inspired, empowered and

unified through their relationships with one another and by commonly overlooked growth-enhancing features of the sports scene.

- Develop a plan for promoting mutual support among parents, athletes and coaches in their team community.
- Identify those features of today's team communities that need "fixing" and take actions to repair the "defects."
- Develop strategies for initiating reforms in school and youth sports that will enhance the sports experiences of everyone who follows.

It is necessary for those with a vision of contentious-free and opportunity expanding sports to discover strategies that inspire parents to invest in equipping themselves to become involved citizens in their team communities. These outcomes will only occur when the consciousness of parents is awakened about what they need to do to prepare themselves to become Savvy Sports Parents.

This collection of booklets has been prepared to help parents:

- A. Understand And Seek Solutions To Today's Youth Sports Challenges (The Sports Challenges Series)
- B. Maximize Possibilities For Athletes, Coaches, Parents, Teams, Schools, Families and Communities (The Sports Possibilities Series)
- C. Develop The Habits Of A Savvy Sports Parent (The Parent Development Series)
- D. Support The Professional Development Of Coaches And Sports Administrators (The Coach Development Series)
- E. Promote The Development Of One's Own Children And Their Teammates (The Athlete Development Series)
- F. Actively Contribute To Team Development (The Team Development Series)
- G. Become Activists In The Enhancement Of School And Youth Sports (The Sports Enhancement Series)
- H. Develop an Opportunity Expanding Perspective On School and Youth Sports (The New Perspectives Series)

The values and principles of an opportunity expanding vision of sports guide the analysis and recommendations found in this collection. By gaining an appreciation of how you can contribute to the enrichment of school and youth sports you will be better equipped to be a contributing citizen in your children's team communities.

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Introduction

In *Team Up With Mom and Dad* I have chosen to focus upon your role in working with your parents to promote good sports experiences for everyone - parents, athletes and coaches. I have elected to emphasize how you can work with your parents and coaches to shape a culture of sport that brings out the best in everyone. By discussing with your parents the things you consider important, you can help shape their expectations for your life in sports so that you can effectively establish a mutually supportive climate. When you have reached agreements about how you are going to work together, conflicts and confusion between you and your parents can be reduced. I am suggesting that you can take actions that help your parents enjoy their experiences in your sports community as your family takes full advantage of the opportunities that sport presents. Together you and your parents, along with your coaches can figure out ways of working effectively with one another as you share your lives in sport.

In this booklet we will offer you opportunities to reflect upon your life in sports and to arrive at ways in which you can work with your parents so that they will be able to help you realize your sports dreams. It is essential that you turn your attention to what it is that gives parents satisfaction from their involvement in your life in sports. Your parents need to get satisfaction from the experience so that they will want to continue to invest their time and energy in helping you enjoy your sports experiences.

PART I

Working With Your Parents

1

Why should you team up with your parents?

Your parents want you to have good experiences in sports. Sometimes they are unprepared to figure out how to provide the kind of support you, your teammates and your coaches need. You can help mom and dad discover what they can do to support you and your team. As you team up with your parents the first step is to learn what it is they want to accomplish on the journey they are sharing with you through the world of sports. You may think you already know what your parents want you to get out of their experiences with you, but it is always a good idea to check out with them the specific things they would like to get out of the experience. By achieving a better understanding of what your parents expect and want, you will be able to help them adjust their expectations so that they will be able to get greater satisfaction from teaming up with you.

If you are going to have the kinds of fun you want in sports you will need to find a comfortable way to let your parents know what it is you hope to get out of your sports experiences. You will also benefit greatly if you are able to clearly communicate to them how they can provide the kinds of support you need in order to realize your dreams in sports.

2

What “payoff” do parents want from their investment in your life in sports?

Every parent is different in what they want to get out of their experiences with their children in sports. There are, however, some common sources of satisfaction that nearly all parents seek as they share their lives in sports with their children.

- **Parents want to be recognized as good parents**

They want the coach, your teammates and the your teammate’s parents to consider them competent and caring parents who are dedicated members of your team communities. That is an attitude that nearly all parents share. If you develop a better understanding of their interests in sport it will help you work out agreements with them so that they will be able to achieve the recognition as a good parent that they seek through your shared lives in sports.

- **Parents want the satisfaction of seeing you become a winner, in every sense of the word.**

You do not need to be the star on the team nor does your team need to win a championship before you will be able to satisfy your parent’s hopes and dreams. To the contrary, most parents want their children to give evidence that they are having fun and making a real effort to become as good as their athletic gifts will allow. They want their children to earn the respect of their teammates, the coaches and the other parents. Many times children misinterpret their parent’s interest in their performance, assuming that they will think less of them if they fail to be successful, that is, if they do not win. You need to seek a clear understanding of what it is your parents want for you. It is not uncommon for children to misread communications from their parents. What parents intend to communicate and how you interpret what they

say are not always the same. When misunderstandings occur you can feel that you have let your parents down. You can avoid confusion and disappointment by setting aside times when you and your parents can discuss how you want to approach sports.

- **Parents want to be able to enjoy the excitement of sport, but not be emotionally overwhelmed.**

Most parents truly enjoy the excitement of witnessing their children compete. Other parents get so nervous it is painful watching their children on the playing field. Still others have a hard time avoiding boredom because they have not yet discovered how to enjoy the excitement created by the drama of sports competition. By getting better acquainted with how your parents handle the excitement of competition will allow you to take actions that will make it easier for them to really have fun. When they are having fun it is easier for them to become consistent sources of support for you and your teammates.

- **Parents want you to appreciate that sport is a good place for you to learn important life lessons.**

Parents reason that if their children can learn how to deal with losses in sports it will help them manage the inevitable frustration from setbacks they are sure to face in living their lives in the “real world.” You can become a partner with your mom and dad in learning how to take advantage of any number of opportunities to prepare yourself for life beyond the playing field. When you learn a life lesson in sports your parents often feel that, through supporting your sports career, they are helping you grow and develop as a person as well as an athlete. These experiences of success feel good and encourage your parents to want to become an important part of your life in sports.

- **Parents want you to discover sources of satisfaction in sports beyond simply winning, accumulating trophies and earning public recognition.**

By opening yourself up to finding new ways of satisfying your needs in sports, you will be able to have more fun and to enjoy more aspects of sport. Discovering new sources of satisfaction will give meaning to your life in sports that will inspire you to communicate to your parents your enthusiasm for what you are doing.

- **Parents want you to learn how to work effectively with your sports partners - coaches, teammates and the other parents.**

Parents want their children to develop the skills to become good citizens in their sports communities. They feel that sport can provide you with many opportunities to work out conflicts with fellow athletes, the coaches and the parents of your teammates. These experiences will allow you to feel as though you are a part of something bigger than yourself. They understand that sports can help you learn how to assume leadership responsibilities when the need arises. They understand that working out relationships with your sports partners will allow you to make sure that your needs are being met. They believe that when you have learned how to work effectively with others you will be able to become contributing members of your sports teams.

- **Parents want the very best sports experiences for their children.**

Your parents would like to see sports reflect the values they promote in your family. Some parents are willing to invest their time and energy in making sports better, not only for their own children, but also for those generations that follow. These parents are prepared to invest time in making changes in the values the program promotes and in the policies and practices that guide the programs. When they are unhappy with their children's sports experiences some parents are ready to work with the parents, coaches and other parents to try to make things better for everyone. When you discover what is troubling your parents you may wish to work with them to make improvements in your sports programs.

3

How can you help your parents get satisfaction from participating in your team community?

By paying close attention to what it is your parents personally want to get out of their involvement in your sports world will allow you to better understand one another so that you can be pushing in the same direction. Knowing where differences exist is important in developing good relationships with one another. You need your parents to be there for you. But your parents also need to know that you have taken the time to learn where they are coming from. When you and your parents share your expectations of one another, conflicts can be avoided and your time together can become good fun. One's journey through the world of sports is always more enjoyable when you are able to share it with someone you really care about and who truly cares about you.

PART II

Becoming a Savvy Athlete

4

What are the characteristic of a savvy athlete?

- They know how to avoid being embarrassed by their parents
- They do not depend on their parents to promote their interests with the coach
- They know how to help their parents relax and enjoy being a part of their life in sports
- They know how to take advantage of opportunities to use sport to learn life lessons
- They think of sport as an experience in which they can really enjoy themselves even when they are not winning or achieving recognition
- They assume responsibility for being an active, well prepared citizen in their team community, ready to take on any tasks that need to be completed
- They take initiatives to make sport a better experience for everyone

5

How can you become a savvy athlete?

You can become a savvy athlete by:

- Coming to a clearer understanding of your own needs so that you can find ways of satisfying these needs without interfering with anyone else's enjoyment of sports.
- Taking the lead in your family so that you no longer need to depend upon your parents to look out for your interests in sports. However, it is in your best interest to encourage your parents to be there for you in the event you need them.
- Being able to control your excitement while participating in sports, so that you are neither bored by too little excitement nor made anxious by too much excitement.
- Taking advantage of opportunities to use sports to learn lessons that will help you for the balance of your life.
- Developing new ways of thinking about sports so that you are able to gain greater satisfaction from your sports experiences.
- Developing the skills for working with the parents, coaches and athletes on your team so that you can all be pushing in the same direction.
- Taking a careful look at your sports program to discover if it is providing you, your teammates, the coaches and parents with experiences that uplift their spirits, make them stronger and bond them to one another.

PART III

Showing Restraint

A Case Study

Commentary

The process of giving birth to children and the extreme intimacy that develops between parents and children during the dependency phase establishes a bond between parents and children that often makes it difficult for parents to separate themselves from their children. They and their children seem to be one and the same. It is not abnormal for parents to experience both their children's pain and their joy. Therefore, it is a short leap for parents to find themselves living through their children when they enter the world of sports.

Since the process of separation of parents and children is a gradual one, the earlier children get involved in sports, the greater is the possibility that their parents will be inclined to live through their children. However, the more opportunities parents have had throughout their lives to clarify their own identity and to feel good about their own accomplishments, the less likely it is that they will try to define themselves through their children.

When parents choose to live through the accomplishments of their children the results can often be painful for the parents, damaging to the development of independence for the children, and a source of conflict for the family and the rest of the members of their team communities. Until parents are able to achieve separation from their children they are vulnerable to crises in parent-child relationships, parent-coach relationships, and coach-child relationships. Let's examine how these crises reveal themselves when parents who have not yet developed their ability to separate themselves from their children.

Alison's Story

Alison and Keith are in the stands watching their daughter, Shelby, compete for the local high school. Alison buries her head in her hands after Shelby makes a highly visible mistake and exclaims "I could just die. It is so embarrassing when Shelby screws up. And to make things even worse the coach was unmerciful when he got in her face. It's so insulting. It's so hard on me. I want to strike back at the coach." Keith tries to comfort Alison, "If the coach would just give Shelby more playing time so that she could learn the fundamentals under game conditions she would make fewer mistakes."

Alison responds, 'I don't know whether I can take another loss

this season. It's really upsetting." Totally frustrated, Keith could not longer restrain himself. He shouted out to Shelby, "Move your feet! Move your feet!"

Shelby's Testimony

I just hate it when my dad shouts at me when I'm competing. It's really embarrassing. I just want to crawl into a hole. It really takes all the fun out of playing. One of the main reasons I play sports is to have fun with my friends. Sometimes I think that my parents don't really understand why I like sports. Many times they get all hung up about who is winning, bad calls, and whether the coach is playing the right players. Those are their issues, not mine.

Sure I want to win. Yes I hate it when I feel that I got a bad call. And of course there are times when I feel that maybe the coach is not playing the right kids. But I've learned that these are things that go with the territory. I am far less worried about those kinds of things than my mom and dad are. But I'm concerned when my dad shouts at me. It confuses me. It messes with my concentration,

Also, I know it bothers the other girls, even though they don't say anything. And I know that it ticks off my coach. I'm sure he takes it as a personal insult. I'd be surprised if it didn't make him feel like my dad thinks the coach is not teaching me the right things. And I just could die when I see how the other parents respond to my dad when he goes crazy.

Your Task:

To learn how to refuse to assume responsibility for your parent's actions.

Skills You Will Need:

- Develop the skills and attitudes that allow you to have "cool" unemotional conversations with your parents where you express how you feel when they take actions that embarrass or hurt you
- Develop a better understanding of how you have developed your style of managing your embarrassment, frustration and anger
- Develop a better understanding for how your parents have developed

their style of managing their embarrassment, frustration and anger

- Accept yourself for who you are as a person and an athlete.
- Accept your parents for who they are as parents and persons.

Conclusion

Until Shelby has begun to master these skills it is unlikely that she will be able to separate herself from her parents enough to be able to reduce the embarrassment she feels when her dad fails to show restraint. Until she begins to master these skills she will be unable to thoroughly enjoy the journey she is sharing with her parents through the world of sports. Everyone in her sports community will be shortchanged by her inability to meet this challenge.

Gut Check

The challenge of separating yourself from your parents will be a life-long process, never fully completed. You will continue to be impacted by the deep-seated forces that originally presented you with this challenge. Your goal is to move beyond identifying with what it is your parents say or do in the bleachers and beyond. It is not an easy undertaking for children to be able to avoid thinking of their parents as an extension of them. It will take time, energy and courage to master the skills that will allow you to learn the skills you will need to manage that part of your relationship with your parents.

6

What can you do to avoid embarrassing your parents?

Sport provokes strong emotions from all the participants on the playing field, on the sidelines and in the bleachers. The egos of athletes, coaches and parents are constantly being challenged. Athletes want to be thought of as worthy of respect, coaches want to demonstrate to their fellow coaches and their communities that they can produce winners and therefore deserve recognition for their accomplishments. And parents want to be thought of as being good at raising children who are talented and well behaved. Like parents and coaches your ability to control your feelings is frequently being tested in the heat of competition. When you are unable to show restraint and express your feelings on the playing field in ways that violate your parent's standards you will undoubtedly be a source of embarrassment to them. They feel responsible for providing you with the upbringing you need to be civil, caring and considerate in your relationships with your sports partners.

By developing the capacity to reflect upon and anticipate how you are affecting others as you compete you will have taken a big step toward avoiding being an embarrassment to your parents and ultimately to yourself.

7

What can you do to help your parents avoid embarrassing you?

Children are sometimes very sensitive to actions by their parents that they consider out of line. They fear that their teammates and coaches will think less of them if their parents do things that are not appropriate or helpful. Many times parents are unaware of what it is that their children consider inappropriate. Parents do not intend to make it uncomfortable for their children and would avoid hurting them if they were aware of what they were doing.

Rather than allow yourself to get frustrated and angry when your parents “do something dumb” find a time away from your sports situation to report to them how it made you feel. In providing your parents with that kind of information it works best if you tell them how it made you feel rather than tell them that they did something wrong or mean. In that way you are reporting how it made you feel rather than indicating that what they did was inappropriate. When you take that approach you are not attacking them, but are simply reporting your reactions to what they did or said. In situations like that you are allowing for the possibility that you misunderstood their intentions and that the problem could be your problem as well as theirs. At the same time you are letting them know how their action affected you.

8

What can you do to better manage your frustration and anger in your life in sports?

In order to better manage your frustration and anger in sports it is useful to consider taking the following actions:

- Identify those sports situations that are most likely to provoke your frustration and anger. Rehearse how you would like to respond. Preserve that image in your mind's eye. You may need it later.
- Identify the typical ways you respond to frustration and anger in sports and consider some possible techniques you can use that will reduce the prospects that you will do "something dumb" you will later regret.
- Think of sports competition in new ways. By discarding the old "in-your-face" approach, that is currently so popular, you can reduce the prospects that you will be tempted to act out your anger in inappropriate ways. A fresh view of sport can allow you to gain perspective on why you got involved in sports in the first place. If your major goals have always been to have fun and be with your friends, then setbacks will have different meanings than if your goal is to gain public recognition for your successes.
- Discuss your goal of changing your approach to sports with those who are close to you, possibly your teammates, your coach or parents. Invite them to join with you in reminding yourselves why you all got involved in sports. If you know that there are others who share your desire to approach sport in a more sane manner, it can make it much easier for you to manage your frustration and anger.

9

What can you do to help your parents better manage their frustration and anger in your life in sports?

Parents differ greatly in how they manage their frustration. Some act out their frustration by letting the person they identify as standing in the way of achieving their goals know what they have “done wrong.” If that person is their child, they will let them know in no uncertain terms, sometimes in very public ways. Or if it is the coach, an official, or an opposing player that is identified as the problem, their natural response will be to challenge or confront them. Other parents reach out to the person they see as causing the frustration in an effort to win them over so that they will no longer be a barrier to achieving their goals. These parents are the ones who “kiss up to the coach,” often times to the embarrassment of their children. Still other parents get so upset that they simply leave the scene. They go out and have a smoke when the competition becomes intense or bury their head in their hands. Any of these ways of managing frustration can be seen as a problem for their children.

Your first task is to understand how your parents manage their anger and determine whether it is working for them and for you. If their approach is making you feel uncomfortable you need to pick a time and a place away from sports to share with them how their acting out of their frustration is affecting you. By not attacking them, but instead focusing upon how their actions make you feel communicates that the problem, is a shared problem rather than their problem. It is much easier for them to respond in a constructive rather than a defensive way when you avoid implying that they have been insensitive to your needs and feelings.

PART VI

Creating a Supportive Team Climate

10

What can you do to create a mutually supportive team climate?

In order for you to be able to get the most out of your sports experience you will need to have everyone pushing in the same direction. Sports are at their best when parents, athletes and coaches have reached an understanding about what roles each is going to play to create a mutually supportive team community. Unless expectations are clearly established as to who is going to do what, with whom, when and where there is always room for misunderstanding. Misunderstanding can lead to conflict and, of course, conflict can interfere with everyone's effectiveness and enjoyment of their sports experiences. Therefore, it is important for parents, athletes, and coaches to refuse to make the assumption that everyone knows the boundaries of their roles in the team community. It is to everyone's advantage for parents, coaches, and athletes to work together to establish clear understandings about how each person is going to contribute to the well being of their sports community.

Team Up With Mom and Dad

How to Strengthen Your Relationships With Your Parents

A Game Plan for Athletes

In *Team Up With Mom and Dad* I have chosen to focus upon the athlete's role in working with their parents to promote good sports experiences for everyone - parents, athletes and coaches. I have elected to emphasize how athletes can work with their parents and coaches to shape a culture of sport that brings out the best in everyone. By discussing with their parents the things athletes consider important, they can help shape their expectations for their life in sports so that they can effectively establish a mutually supportive team climate."



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