

Volume 4. The Team Development Series

Strengthen Parent-Coach Relations

**How to Appreciate the
Challenges Coaches Face**



DAVID CANNING EPPERSON, PH.D.

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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 opportuni-

ties 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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Coaches tend to be simplistic, conservative and dictatorial ... Coaches unquestionably intrude upon the civil rights of the young men and women who serve under them. ... coaches generally believe that it is their prerogative to lay down ... rules and to enforce them by such economic sanctions as terminating scholarships.

James Mitchner
Sports in America

1

Ambitious Coaches: Heroes, Villains or Victims?

As his team was carrying Coach Bubba Battle off the court the band played the school fight song while the parents and student body stood shoulder to shoulder chanting Buh-Buh, Buh-Buh... This was not the first time that he had won a regional championship. For more than a decade this hard driving mid-career coach had fielded teams that were either city, regional, or state champions or contenders. No one doubted the ability of this tough taskmaster to field winning teams.

After meeting with the local sports writer and greeting the regional high school association commissioner he retired to his dressing room and showered in preparation for going out for a late night snack with his new wife. As he was walking to his car in the school parking lot to join his wife, Beverly, he was overcome with an intense sense of loneliness, a feeling he had frequently experienced as he left the comfortable confines of the gym. His first wife, Ruth, had found it difficult to manage the moods that Bubba experienced during the ebb and flow of sports seasons that never seemed to end, before he was preparing for the next season. He feared that if he did not immediately begin preparations for the next season he would lose his edge.

Extremely competitive from a very early age Bubba always had a difficult time establishing close personal relationships with those around him. While he did not engage in battles with his colleagues, he always seemed to view everyone as a potential adversary. Even on the highway he approached other motorists as competing with him for space on the road. In his relationships with athletes he embraced what he referred to as a "tough love" philosophy of coaching, where he put heavy demands on his athletes. But he justified his strict discipline as a reflection of his deep concern for the wellbeing of his young charges. He genuinely believes that he is giving his athletes a gift by placing heavy demands on them in practices and games. To many of his athletes and colleagues his overbearing approach seemed to be motivated by his need to always be in control, to always be right and to win at whatever cost to him and his athletes.

Coach Battle, when the cheering stopped, frequently suffered from fits of dark loneliness, never feeling really close to anyone. He was already experiencing strain in his relationships with his new younger wife, who was beginning to feel neglected by his single-minded drive to be a winner. Bubba could never understand why Ruth felt neglected because he did everything she asked of him. It did not occur to him that what she really wanted was to have him take initiative and do something nice for her, without having to be asked. His experiences have not allowed him to learn how to reach out to nurture his soul by touching the souls of those who he passed on his journey through the world of sports. He had thought that all that he needed was an occasional win on the court to sustain him in his quest for meaning.

In his relationship with his athletes Coach Battle made a point of not allowing himself to get too close, for fear it would cause jealousy and dissension on his team. He also found it difficult to get close to any of his coaching colleagues at the school because he felt they were constantly making efforts to get a bigger piece of the athletic department budget. And he made a concerted effort to avoid getting close to any of the parents of the athletes on his team for fear that he would be accused of being partial to the children of the parents with whom he developed relationships. In short, Bubba Battle was a very lonely, emotionally isolated and intimacy starved person who always seemed to find reasons to maintain distance from everyone in his life, in spite of a daily schedule that put him in the midst of a crowd.

Is there something about coaching or about the kinds of people who are attracted to coaching that make it difficult for so many of them to experience genuine intimacy in their lives. We all need to have our souls “recharged” from time to time through intimacy with those around us. Such hunger can lead to long stretches of lonely desperation. The coaching role makes it easy for coaches to escape into a world of their own, free from interference from supervisors, peer evaluators, but also free from sources of emotional support. And many of those who choose the coaching life style have done so because it reinforces an image of themselves as not being worthy of respect from those around them for anything other than success on the sidelines.

In his everyday professional life Bubba is dedicated to maintaining distance from his athletes, concluding that his task is limited to teaching them the fundamentals of the game, which of course, his record would suggest he does exceptionally well. He keeps his distance from parents in an effort to avoid the possibility that they will challenge his judgment or try to modify his assessment of their children. He

has been heard to say that he wished “All of his athletes came from orphanages.”

With his colleagues he is “all business.” He does not want to seem weak by exposing his personal feelings because he knows he will have to compete with his colleagues for financial support from the school and for recognition for his achievements in the school community.

Bubba’s relationships with his friends, none of whom could by any stretch of imagination be called intimates, are shallow, limited to the traditional playful putdowns and sparring that characterize the male sports culture. Towel snapping becomes more sophisticated when athletes “mature.” The only relationship where he is at all open about his feelings is with his new wife, a woman twelve years his junior, who admires his achievements, but feels neglected because of his single minded focus on his coaching. Because he knows that she holds him on a pedestal and looks to him for protection, he is guarded about revealing any weakness for fear that he will disappoint her. Since his divorce ten years earlier he has had little contact with his two children who are now late teenagers. He has always been too busy to spend much time with them even though his relationship with their mother has been amicable.

Bubba’s relationships with strangers are cordial and polite. But he shows little interest in what is occurring in their lives and has no patience with small talk. And he is intolerant of poor service from waiters, clerks, company representatives, etc. He often views strangers as adversaries who are trying to take advantage of him. Others he views as incompetents who deserve only his scorn. He has few interests beyond sports. He seldom reads beyond the sports page in the local paper. He has little patience for leisure reading and no interest whatsoever in the arts. He has become a one dimensional man.

Bubba is very much caught up in his own limited life in the gym. He finds anything that interrupts his daily routines to be a source of frustration and becomes very impatient with those who cause him to leave his comfort zone. He tries to keep his daily life as simple as possible so that he is not challenged to change his routines. He is convinced that his daily regimen and personal discipline is what has allowed him to become a consistent winner.

He is driven to succeed and resents any diversions that arise, whether they come from athletes who fail to pay attention; parents who challenge his judgment; colleagues who divert attention from him with small talk or conversation about themselves; friends when they make demands on his time; his wife when she attempt to draw his attention

away from work and onto helping her with household matters; his children when they are having problems that draw him into their lives; and strangers who fail to appreciate the value of his time. In short, Bubba is a man on an island of his own making. Over the years, however, he has benefited from a lot of help in finding his way to that lonely spot. His parents praised his achievements from the very beginning. Their constant admiration caused him to conclude that the best way to find love is to earn a trip to the victory stand where he can become the center of attention. As he developed as a better than average athlete his coaches contributed to his drive to succeed on the playing field by providing recognition each time he accomplished a new milestone in his sports career. Sport provides a never ending ladder to climb that never allows athletes to achieve a sense of closure. They are always becoming, never simply being who they are.

The women in Bubba's life were attracted to him to a large extent because of his achieving ways and masculine wholesome looks, not because of his relationship skills or his tenderness. Bubba is one tough hard-driving jock, as his nickname suggests. His friends and colleagues demonstrate admiration and respect from afar.

He and his children spent very little time together as they were growing up except for those times when he took them out on the driveway to impose his "sports wisdom." He was only available to his children on his schedule and his terms. His son and daughter did not look to him for emotional support because he found it so difficult to provide them with the unconditional love they sought. His attitude seem to communicate "be successful and you will win my love." He would praise his children only when they passed an achievement milestone. It is no wonder that their mother became their primary source of nurturance and emotional support.

Bubba has become a valued "object" in the lives of those closest to him. He became important to his athletes for what he could do for them in their lives on the playing field.

Bubba conspired with the key people in his life to live an emotionally barren and isolated life. He experiences his separation and isolation as loneliness and depression. But he takes no initiatives to remove himself from this emotional desert. Instead he rationalizes his discomfort as the price one has to pay to become King of the Hill.

Let's review Bubba's intimacy scorecard with the various actors in his life drama.

<u>Actor</u>	<u>Style of Relationship</u>	<u>Level of Intimacy</u>
Athletes	Command and Control	None
Team Parents	Avoidance	None
Colleagues	Competitive	Low
Friends	Ritualized	Shallow
Wife	Neglectful	Limited
His Children	Estranged	Distant
Strangers	Adversarial	None

Do parents of athletes want their children mentored by self-absorbed, driven, insensitive, narrow, lonely coaches? Most parents fail to reflect on the reality that their children typically spend more hours each week with their high school coaches than with them. Are these the kinds of people parents want shaping the lives of their children? Is giving their children an edge on the playing field worth the price they have to pay when allowing their children to reside “under the influence” of the Bubba Battles of this world? Are their children likely to want to be like this one-dimensional emotionally empty human being? What are the chances that their interpersonal insensitivities will not only diminish their athlete’s passion for sport, but also will do irreparable harm to the young athlete’s sense of self? Might you be running the risk that your child will become a casualty of a care-less “in-your-face” sports culture from which they will never be able to truly escape?

The team community created by Coach Battle is, to say the least, coach-centered, where athletes are treated as chess pieces for accomplishing Bubba’s ambitions of achieving coaching prominence.

Unfortunately his single-minded rise to notoriety has been aided by an American culture that has steadfastly fostered his competitive spirit at every turn. His family, friends and colleagues, in collusion with the American Spirit of Achievement, have prevented Bubba from developing his capacity for genuine intimacy. Some would consider him a victim rather than a hero or a villain.

What are the features of the American culture that promote Bubba’s separation and isolation from those around him?

- a. **The idealization of relentless pursuit of personal happiness and independence rather than collective goals and interests.** This value is reflected in the star system in sports where the media focuses heavily upon the accomplishments of individual athletes rather than upon the accomplishments of teams.

- b. **The celebration of the strong, heroic Arnold Schwarzenegger like male figures who never reveal emotional weakness.** “Big Boys Don’t Cry”
- c. **The idolization of independent males who do not have to depend on anyone for their physical or emotional wellbeing.**
- d. **A universal competitive spirit that drives our free market economy**
- e. **The protestant work ethic** that underpins the work ethic that has been emphasized so heavily by sports leaders where achievers are expected to exploit every opportunity that comes their way through hard work.
- f. **The obsession with celebrity** where achievers gain an inflated level of recognition. This adoration causes sports heroes to remain highly focused on retaining their position of superiority in the pecking order so that their egos can continue to feed on the attention that sports personalities receive.

Bubba preaches being a team player, but by “team player” he means holding each individual accountable to him for his or her actions on the playing field. And more importantly it means obeying his directives. Through his actions he is promoting individualism, through his words he is preaching collective responsibility. The individualism of in-your-face sports supports Bubba’s personal predisposition to pit individuals against individuals.

He feels it is necessary to project an image of tough, hardnosed masculinity. Such an approach discourages intimate emotional expressiveness. His tough façade makes it difficult for anyone to connect with him. Both his words and actions speak “Refuse to allow your hopes and fears to be exposed, for fear they will be exploited by your opponents.” The John Wayne image haunts the world of sports, just as it does so many other features of our culture.

He believes that his only accountability is to his own standards of excellence and to his own sense of what is appropriate at the time. He fears getting into interdependent relationships where he feel obligated to anyone else. Therefore, collaborative approaches to managing a team are not something that would occur to him. Further, for Bubba he is driven by:

The competitive spirit that drives our free market economy rather than the cooperative spirit

The protestant ethic that serves as the foundation of the work ethic that is emphasized so heavily by sports leaders rather than the recreational ethic.

The obsession with celebrity where achievers are able to gain a level of recognition that causes them to aggressively remain focused so that their egos can be regularly feed with the attention they receive rather than the celebration of the ordinary.

By now you may have concluded that the portrait of Bubba Battle I have so vividly painted represents an unfair, exaggerated and distorted view of today's successful coaches. I have chosen to present an extreme case of the impact of an out-of-control achievement drive on the life of a coach in order to highlight the challenge parents face as they guide their children on their journey through the world of sports. I have attempted to show that it may be more appropriate to consider these driven achievers as *victims* rather than as either *villains* or *heroes*. I have put forward this extreme example, and there are far too many coaches that fit this description than we want to acknowledge, to alert parents to the need to prepare themselves and their children for the challenges they face as they work with coaches, athletes and other parents in an effort to create mutually supportive team communities that bring out the best in everyone. Not only do parents face coaches who have been emotionally deprived by their upbringing as jocks, but also they must do battle with a culture of sport that nurtures and supports those who have been "de-formed" by a world of sports that overvalues conquest and undervalues care, consideration and compassion. Sport has become one of the prime carriers of the values of the Culture of Conquest, where toughness is celebrated and tenderness goes unrewarded. Bubba Battle and those coaches who have been indoctrinated into the prevailing in-your-face sports tradition have achieved recognition for their winning ways and their command and control methods. Seldom are jocks rewarded for their caring ways.

How can moms and dads prepare themselves and their children to resist being impacted by these limiting values, values that can support attitudes and behaviors that remain with athletes for a lifetime, wreaking havoc on their relationships over a lifetime? That is the challenge that parents face as they make decisions about how intimately to become

involved in the life of their children's teams.

Am I sounding an alarm by warning that the baby sitter may prey on the souls of your children? I wish it were that simple. It's far worse than that. I have concluded that it is not coaches who parents need to fear, for they should be considered victims, not villains. Instead, it is a far more sinister force we need to fear, one that bombards young athletes from all angles. It is the "in-your-face" culture of sport that threatens the wellbeing of our children and their sports communities, of which the coach is simply an unwitting agent. Television sports, the print media, the sporting goods industry, and sports associations are all major carriers of these disabling cultural traditions. They are disabling because they limit the development of some of our children's most human capabilities, their ability to connect with their fellow men and women. And that is the tragedy of in-your-face sports traditions.

The tragedy of becoming a jock is that you tend to develop defenses that isolate you from those around you. Becoming a true believer in contentious culture of sport is a sure recipe for loneliness.

Sport and loneliness do not have to be diabolical companions. To the contrary, sport can become a powerful connector that brings together diverse people who are able to share their lives in intimate ways. But to achieve that noble end it is necessary to adopt a radically different spirit of sport. If the mainstream "in-your-face" culture of sport is to be challenged, carriers of the Culture of Care, who can bring consideration and compassion onto the playing field, on the sidelines, in the clubhouse and in the bleachers, need to gain ways to have their influence felt in the world of sports. Who can become the carriers of the spirit of the Culture of Care? And most importantly who among them has the courage to challenge those forces that are de-forming not only today's coaches, but also the young athletes who are being guided by these limited, tragic figures, the Bubba Battles of the world. We need re-formation not de-formation. Those of us who care about sport need to demonstrate our caring ways by reaching out to our children's coaches, preparing ourselves and our children for what lies out there in a cutthroat world of sports, and most importantly we need to prepare ourselves for citizenship in our children's sports communities so that we can infuse the world of sports for children with those values that will allow our children to grow into complete human beings. We want them to not only engage in a quest for gold, but also to strive to develop those values, attitudes and skills that will allow them to become fulfilled citizens, friends and family members.

2

The Art of Managing a Can of Worms: How to Skillfully Involve Parents in School Sports Programs

Margaret McKnight, the principal at Lincoln High School, was concerned that the parents at her school were not as actively involved in the life of the school as she would like. She was having a hard time getting parents out for any of the school activities other than sports. Hoping that she might be able to use Lincoln's popular sports programs as a way to bring parents into closer relationship with the school, she convened a meeting of the athletic director, coaching staff, a couple of leaders from the sports booster club along with the team captains. She asked this group to come up with ways to get the parents of athletes more intimately involved in the life of the school, reminding them that nearly half of the student body participates in their sports programs. Her school has had a long history of producing winning teams.

Understanding that if Lincoln is to achieve the support it needs from the community to meet its budgetary requirements at a time when enrollments are up and economies have been put into place, the school will need to get more parents to take initiatives to support, not only the sports programs, but also the schools academic programs as well. She believes that sport could be that linkage with parents that would allow them to become advocates for more generous community support for all of Lincoln's programs.

As she listened to the group discuss how to effectively involve parents she was struck by how differently they described what they would need to do to make a sports season a success. After hearing a lively discussion about the importance of winning, sportsmanship, a positive attitude and helpful involvement by parents she was encouraged by the willingness of most everyone to express their views. However, it became apparent that there were differences of opinion about what should be emphasized and how their teams should be administered. Some of the parents sided with the coaches when they focused upon

what it would take to produce a winning team. Others sided with the athletes who bluntly reminded the parents and coaches that their main concern was having fun, enjoying their friends and feeling appreciated by coaches and parents. The athletes universally reported they would like to have coaches and parents provide them with more encouragement and less criticism. However, some of the athletes were very focused upon what it would take to have a winning season. Clearly, there were different viewpoints about the role of sports in the lives of the athletes, coaches and parents.

As Ms. McKnight left the meeting she was pleased with the candor of the contributors to the discussion, but felt it was going to be a real challenge to get everyone on the same page. This meeting had opened her eyes about how diverse were the expectations for the sports programs, both among and between the parents, athletes and coaches. Not only do parents, athletes and coaches view the mission of sport differently, but also there are significant differences within each of these groups about what they want to get out of their sports experiences. She was concerned that it was going to be difficult for everyone to feel as though his or her agenda was being met. She worried about how she was going to get everyone pushing in the same direction when they have such different hopes and expectations for the sports program. She wondered, "Have I opened up a can of worms by initiating this conversation about how we can get parents more skillfully involved in our sports programs? How am I going to manage the differences in expectations without causing a split among those who are highly focused on winning and those who have a more expansive view of the role of sports in our school community? By having this meeting have I deepened the split between parents and the school, or have I taken the first step toward reducing the general apathy among the parents and healing an undercurrent of distrust and disagreement?"

The world of sports is like every other sector of American life where different viewpoints are allowed to compete for the loyalties of the people. To get a glimpse of these divisions one simply has to listen for a few minutes to any of the radio sports talk shows. These programs thrive on controversy. The callers and hosts are passionate about their views and it is not uncommon for these over the air discussions to be contentious and sometimes even mean spirited. Sports fans feel they have every right to challenge the performances of athletes and to second-guess the decisions of coaches. It should not be surprising that sports parents feel they too have the right to criticize the performance of athletes or to render unsolicited opinions about all matters of sports?

In our communities there is competition and controversy everywhere: between conservative, liberal and radical visions of the Good Society; among ideas about how to control terrorism, gain respect in the international community, levy taxes, preserve natural resources, regulate abortion, gay marriages, firearms, etc. In America, from the very beginning, there has been competition among the various religious doctrines, as well as among ethnic traditions. In addition, one of the defining features of American life is the competition that exists between the various interest groups; those associations of like-minded people who band together to oppose those forces standing in the way of achieving their vision of the good life. For example, we are regularly made aware of how the National Rifle Association mobilizes its members in opposition to those who would restrict the ownership and use of firearms.

The tone of the competition has often become uncivil in recent years. Debra Tannen refers to this new climate of discord as “the argument culture” where debates, contests and competition too often turn ugly and mean spirited. It seems clear that sport has contributed its fair share to the perpetuation of contentiousness with the “in-your-face” actions of athletes, coaches and parents gaining high profile media attention. There is nothing like taunting athletes, screaming coaches, or out of control parents to attract the cameras and the viewers.

It should not be surprising that there are differences among athletes, coaches and parents as to how to build a team community, since their needs and interests can be so diverse. At this point in the history of sport, however, special interest groups, representing the ambitions of families with different hopes and dreams for sport have seldom emerged in any organized way. Nevertheless, it is not uncommon for parents to band together to call for the removal of a coach they feel is not providing the type of leadership they believe their children deserve. But rarely do parents join together with a well worked out manifesto advocating a particular philosophy of sport that they as a group are prepared to promote and defend. There are few systematic plans of action in parent communities for effecting reform in sports programs for children. That does not mean that there are not marked differences in what families want their children to get out of their experiences in their team communities. Parents have simply not, as yet, united to demand that their particular views on sport be reflected in programs for their children. They typically yield to the school and club sports leadership on matters of sports policies and practices. Or these families simply drop out of sports all together, never to be heard from again, rather than

to take on a sports establishment that is out of sync with their values. This reluctance to push their own ideas about sports for their children can have its roots in any of the following: 1) they realize that not all parents would agree with their assessments of what is wrong with sport; they conclude that it would be impossible to mobilize opposition to what they see happening in mainstream sports, 2) they do not feel they can clearly articulate or adequately defend an approach that reflects their values, 3) they are fairly comfortable with what they see happening with their children in sports and do not believe that the payoff from investing in trying to bring about modest change would justify the effort, 4) they don't like many things they see happening to their children in sports, but are unwilling to take on the long, arduous battle of trying to bring about change. They know it could get ugly and emotionally taxing trying to go against the flow of mainstream sports.

Unfortunately, in today's climate, where the professional sports establishment is the primary definer of the character of sport in American culture, there is little systematic discussion about which navigational map to use to guide a family's journey through the world of sports. There is occasional public and private conversation about the overemphasis upon winning, about bad coaching and poor sportsmanship, but beyond these rare calls for remedial action, little programmatic effort to effect change can be identified. There are, however, sports families who would be willing to invest in bringing about change in the ways their children and their families are involved in team communities.

I will describe two contrasting maps (routes, models, paradigms, or archetypes) that can be used to guide the initiatives parents take to help their families get the most out of their sports experience. These are not meant to represent positions that are consistently adhered to by any particular parent, athlete or coach. Instead these contrasting routes for a family's journey through the world of sport are presented as competing viewpoints intended to serve as tools for stimulating discussion about how a mutually supportive team community can be formed in a world of sport populated by people with vastly different expectations and values. I will identify a number of issues that need to be addressed in any deliberations about how school and youth sports can be organized to best serve the interests of athletes and their families. I will discuss the challenges presented within a pluralistic, multi-cultural framework that nurtures and cherishes competition among different perspectives. I will also consider whether it is, in fact, feasible to accommodate differences in a sports system that has become a monopoly for local schools and

the dominant youth sports organizations, such as Little League, Pop Warner, US Youth Soccer etc. in a nation where the professional sports establishment controls the airways with their particular brand of “good sports.”

Without question, the professional sports model has profoundly impacted the culture of sport from tiny tots, to school, to college sports. Few, if any, realistic alternatives exist for those who embrace an approach to sport that departs from the model presented by the professional sports community. Professional sports currently offer an omnipresent map for guiding families through the world of sports. Unfortunately, many parents, athletes, and coaches, in trying to follow that high profile map, have lost their way. They have too often been forced to choose a pathway that leads them to dead ends or to places where they feel they do not belong. On these mainstream routes the promise of experiencing enchantment through sports is seldom realized.

Mapping A Journey Through the World of Sport

We have all followed old maps only to discover that they do not lead us where we want to go. Unfortunately, the map issued by the professional sports establishment, referred to here as the Old Route for a journey through the world of sports, is guiding many of today’s parents, athletes and coaches. In contrast, there is a longer route to a quite different location that I have called the New Route for a journey through the world of sports that has appeal to those families who have discovered the potential of sport to inspire, empower and unify families and communities. This latter route is more “scenic” and has possibilities for significantly enriching the lives of those travelers who choose this pathway. But the new route is longer and takes more planning and preparation. What are the major features of these contrasting models?

Contrasting Routes For the Journey Through the World of Sports

THE OLD ROUTE

- Outcome Oriented (Winning)
- Serve only Elite athletes
- A Commercial Enterprise
- Driven by Television Requirements
- Celebrates Contentiousness

THE NEW ROUTE

- Process Oriented
- Serve Everyone
- Commercial Free
- Driven by the Needs of Families
- Celebrates Community

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| • Athletes are Interchangeable Parts | Athletes are Unique |
| • Coaches Judged by Win-Loss Records | Coaches Judged by Leadership Skills |
| • Opportunism is Tolerated | Team Loyalty is Prized |

Today’s sports parents are often conflicted over which of these approaches they wish to support. They are challenged, because in this pluralistic nation where we are provided with a wide range of choices we often have difficulty reconciling competing values.

While we embrace competition in all sectors of society, we realize that there can be undesirable “side effects” of a contest. We profess to be an egalitarian nation with concerns for the well being of everyone, but in so many sectors of our lives the social, economic and political elites are the ones who have easier access to rewards and recognition. In addition, we appreciate how commercialism can corrupt human activity, but at the same time we understand the benefits of giving the free enterprise system unfettered opportunities to satisfy the appetites of sports consumers, just as we do in other sectors of the economy. We realize that the requirements of commercial TV demand that the productions be entertaining and compelling, yet we feel that sports for children ought to be driven by the needs of our children and families, rather than by the needs of the owners of professional sports franchises. We aspire to have our children treated as full-fledged citizens in their sports communities where their voice is heard and their unique abilities, needs and interests are accommodated. However, we understand that in order for sport to be organized so that parity in competition can be achieved it is necessary to distribute talent among the teams that compete against one another. We realize that one of the most important qualities that coaches can bring to a team is to be able to provide leadership for their athletes so that our children can get the most out of their sports experiences. At the same time we are impatient when our child’s coaches are unable to produce winning teams. We understand the benefits of team loyalty, but we want to reserve the right to send our children to those coaches who have the greatest rate of success.

Is it any wonder we find conflict both within and between parents, athletes and coaches about whether to follow the Old Route or the New Route? Shouldn’t we expect that we would be opening a can of worms when we involve parents and athletes in discussions about what we should emphasize in our school sports programs? Aren’t we just inviting trouble by adopting a collaborative approach to managing sports

teams?

As a way of coming to a better understanding about how to manage differences that exist in a team community, or more explicitly developing the art of managing “the can of worms” we are opening when a discussion about sports policies and practices is provoked, let’s look more closely at how the old and new sports models suggest that we deal with a number of defining issues regarding the creation of a team community.

We can all agree that it is desirable for a team community to be ordered, supportive, protective, enriching, expansive, cohesive, and innovative. The question, however, becomes one of how to go about creating a team community that possesses these qualities. Let’s examine how those who follow the old and new routes to sports would answer questions about how to build a team community that is ordered, supportive etc.

How can an ORDERED team community be created?

- Those who follow the Old Route depend upon coaches to set standards and enforce rules as a means of managing potential disruptive conduct by athletes and parents.
- Those who follow the New Route encourage the team community to develop its own guidelines for effectively managing potentially disruptive conduct.

How can a SUPPORTIVE team community be created?

- Those who follow the Old Route emphasize developing winning ways, recognizing that success typically produces harmony and mutual support
- Those who follow the New Route emphasize building mutually supportive relationships, understanding that effective relationships can increase the prospects for success but that harmony and mutual support can be worthy ends in themselves.

How can a PROTECTIVE team community be created?

- Those who follow the Old Route assign power and authority to coaches to protect the interests of the team.
- Those who follow the New Route call for sharing responsibility among parents, athletes and coaches for protecting the interests of the

team.

- Those who follow the Old Route deny many young athletes and their families access to quality sports experiences because of the emphasis upon the elite athlete.
- Those who follow the New Route ensure that everyone has equal access to the benefits of participating in a team community.

How can an ENRICHING team community be created?

- Those who follow the Old Route concentrate upon remedying the deficiencies in parents, athletes and coaches rather than on celebrating their assets.
- Those who follow the New Route give primary attention to the strengths parents, athletes and coaches bring to the team community.
- Those who follow the Old Route attempt to change the attitudes and values of “clients” of school and youth sports (athletes and their parents).
- Those who follow the New Route equip parents, athletes and coaches with the skills they need for their respective roles in the team community.

How can an EXPANSIVE team community be created?

- Those who follow the Old Route emphasize enhancing sports performance rather than the expansion of opportunities for success and satisfaction.
- Those who follow the New Route help parents, athletes and coaches become better aware of the various ways they can satisfy their needs and interests in their team communities.
- Those who follow the Old Route adopt policies and practices that are based upon the requirements of a past era, when command and control leadership was more common in commerce and industry.
- Those who follow the New Route identify and pursue new possibilities in sport for today and tomorrow to accommodate the requirements for collaboration in this new era.

How can a COHESIVE team community be created?

- Those who follow the Old Route concentrate upon enhancing

performance, but do not make provisions for achieving rapport and reaching agreements among parents, athletes and coaches

- Those who follow the New Route work toward reaching agreements that serve as guidelines for charting the course of the sports season and for establishing effective working relationships among parents, athletes and coaches.
- Those who follow the Old Route place the burden on the coach for the success of the sports program. Defining and enforcing team standards becomes a major preoccupation of coaches.
- Those who follow the New Route give parents, athletes and coaches a voice in shaping the direction of the team so that they can share the burden of maintaining team standards.
- Those who follow the Old Route require the coach to assume full responsibility for taking initiatives to build a mutually supportive team community.
- Those who follow the New Route provide parents and athletes with opportunities to engage in activities that build mutually supportive team communities.
- Those who follow the Old Route treat parents as clients, customers or boosters rather than as citizens in the team community.
- Those who follow the New Route encourage parents, athletes and coaches to assume their rights and responsibilities as active participants in the team community.
- Those who follow the Old Route adopt policies and practices that are guided exclusively by what is in the best interest of the sports organization, hence giving little consideration to how the policies and practices impact the family and neighborhood.
- Those who follow the New Route places high priority on strengthening the family and the neighborhood through sports.
- Those who follow the Old Route give priority to efficiency over effectiveness by taking shortcuts to maintain order.
- Those who follow the New Route subordinate the need for efficiency to the need to be effective in achieving team goals.

How can an INNOVATIVE team community be created?

- Those who follow the Old Route subordinate the principles of good sports: respect, responsibility, civility, nurture, creativity, communion and civic duty to the enhancement of performance.
- Those who follow the New Route establish the foundation for team policies and practices that are grounded in the principles of respect, responsibility, civility, nurture, creativity, communion and civic duty.
- Those who follow the Old Route defend current policies and practices when challenged by those with a more expansive view of what sport can become.
- Those who follow the New Route challenge current approaches to sport that are not adequately serving the needs of parents, athletes and coaches.

Below I have summarized the issues that separate the Old and New Routes for a journey through the world of sports that have the potential of fracturing a team community.

SUMMARY

Old and New Routes for a Journey through the World of Sports

THE OLD ROUTE	THE NEW ROUTE
Rule-Enforcing	Boundary-Setting
Victory-Guided	Support-Guided
Abuse-Tolerating.	Abuse-Reducing
Justice-Inhibiting.	Justice-Promoting
Deficiency-Based.	Asset-Based
Attitude-Bending	Skill-Developing
Performance-Enhancing	Opportunity-Enhancing
Tradition-Affirming	Forward-Looking
Coach-Centered	PACT-Centered
Coach-Governed	Collaboration-Governed
Coach-Driven	Parent-Driven
Client-Directed	Citizen-Directed
Sports-Focused	Family-Focused
Efficiency-Tilted	Effectiveness-Tilted
Principle-Ignoring	Principle-Grounded
Status Quo-Maintaining	Change-Oriented

While the vast majority of parents, coaches and athletes embrace the Old Route, there appears to be an increasing undercurrent of support for the New Route. Recognizing this growing tension how is it going to be possible to reconcile these competing maps for negotiating a journey through the world of sports?

How to Reconcile These Different Maps for a Journey Through the World of Sports

In order to reconcile different approaches to building a team community, and hence avoid “opening a can of worms,” that cannot be effectively managed it is necessary to:

1. Assure coaches that neither parents nor athletes will be allowed to intrude into their rightful area of decision-making and control, that is, deciding upon playing time, game strategy, training regimen etc. Indicate further that coaches will be provided with opportunities to describe and justify their coaching style in a comfortable non-confrontational situation on their own terms.
2. Agree to recognize the legitimacy of alternative approaches to building a team community and to allow these approaches to be elaborated, promoted and evaluated.
3. Provide opportunities for everyone to get better acquainted with one another so they will find it easier to agree to disagree and hence be better able to find a compromise approach to managing their differences on building a team community.
4. Build a common ground among those with differing perspectives on forming a team community by identifying those values and issues upon which they can agree.
5. Identify issues upon which they can agree, especially those issues that allow them to reach agreement upon how they are going to create a team community which is ordered, supportive, protective, enriching, expansive, cohesive, and innovative. Identify those areas upon which they are unable to agree and arrive at a process for managing these disagreements that is least disruptive to the process of creating a positive team climate.

6. At the outset decide upon a procedure for arriving at a course of action for the team by focusing upon the procedure itself rather than upon reconciling specific differences.
7. Establish procedures for arriving at decisions about how to handle specific issues regarding building a team community rather than getting bogged down in discussions about general principles and philosophy alone.
8. Provide an orderly forum for parents, athletes and coaches for advancing different approaches to building a team community.
9. Establish clear boundaries for their respective roles within the limits of those areas where they can be of the same mind. At that point agree upon a process for managing differences when they arise.
10. Develop clearly defined procedures for resolving conflicts throughout the season that have their roots in differences in perspectives.

The question that the Lincoln principal, Margaret McKnight, raised was whether getting parents involved in deliberations about how to manage their children's sports teams would "open up a can of worms." The answer has to be, yes, it could very well open up the possibility that differences in expectations for the sports program could be revealed when parents and athletes, who typically have not been provided opportunities to express their views, suddenly are given license to step forward with their thoughts about how the sports program should be run.

By assigning parents the rights and responsibilities of citizenship in their children's team communities, makes it necessary for coaches and sports administrators to develop new ways of relating to athletes and their families. However, we need to remind ourselves that "good worms" can escape from the can. They can immediately proceed to fertilize the soil and become assets to gardens where they promote growth. But also "bad worms" can find their way out of the can that have the capacity to drain their hosts of life by denying them the nurture they require. The challenge becomes, how can coaches and athletes develop the art of managing parents, both parents who come to them predisposed to be helpful and those who are predisposed to be difficult, when they invite parents into the team community? The only way to avoid bringing into team communities parents who "feast on others"

is to take precautions that maximize the prospects that parents will become nurturing contributors to team communities is to prepare them for responsible citizenship and leadership before turning them loose. Parents need to be provided with opportunities to equip themselves to play nurturing roles in their team communities. But also athletes need preparation for their expanded role as full-fledged citizens in their team communities. And most assuredly coaches need to feel confident that parents and athletes will not step over the boundaries and intrude onto their turf.

Preparation for new relationships to the team community is provided when parents, athletes and coaches invest in defining their respective roles and focus on how they can support one another in the performance of these roles. By agreeing to participate in activities where they can clarify their expectations of one another, they will be able to establish procedures for reconciling differences as they arise. Further, they will be able to enter into season-long relationships that nurture the host organism, that is, the team community. It is not “opening the can” that increases the risk of creating “ecological imbalance.” Instead it is when the host is unprepared for an invasion of intruders that damage and destruction can occur. Acts of reconciliation, like those I outlined above, are the best protection against interlopers whose self-serving actions threaten the well being of a team community. It is so much easier to take preventive action before an ugly scene occurs than to take remedial action after an “invader” has damaged the corpus of the team community.

Inviting deliberations among parents, athletes and coaches that permit careful review of alternative approaches to administering sports programs for children involves little risk if proper preparations are made. The new arrivals to the policy-making chamber need to be “naturalized” before they are granted full citizenship. I would argue that failing to give parents and athletes full citizenship rights and responsibilities can increase risk because it opens up team communities to becoming out of sync with the realities of today’s world. Parents and athletes need citizenship even if they are not permanent members of a school community. In spite of the fact they are in the school or club in a limited role for a limited time, whereas coaches and administrators are permanent guardians of a public trust, they have every right to be involved in their children’s team communities. To whom does a sports team belong? Clearly it not only belongs to the school or club it represents in competition, but it also belongs to those who are shaping its character through their actions, including parents and athletes as well

as coaches.

If we consider sport to be a “cutthroat” activity that reflects the realities of a dog-eat-dog “real world” beyond the gym walls, we might be justified in using sport to help young athletes learn how to “swim with the sharks.” If that is what we decide, then the professional “win at any cost” sports model makes sense. Today the “real world,” away from the playing field, no longer demands people who have learned how to play cutthroat games. Instead, in today’s world it is more important than ever for young people to learn skills of collaboration that allow them to perform effectively in commerce and industry. In the twenty-first century our children need to learn how to “swim with the dolphins” where they are able to prosper in the “real world, by empowering and nurturing others, by showing appreciation, by sharing the workload and building consensus.” Psychologist David Nathanson, who uses dolphins to administer therapy to his handicapped patients, put it well. “The number one question children always ask me is, ‘Can a dolphin beat up a shark?’ And my answer is always, ‘Yes, they do it all the time. And they do it by working together cooperatively.’”

In today’s world, including the world of sports, knowing how to empower, nurture, appreciate, share and build consensus are essential for anyone aspiring to prosper and make a contribution to their world. This suggests that parents, athletes and coaches can justify spending time together practicing skills for building mutually supportive team communities.

The Old Route to sports that I described earlier is predicated upon the assumption that we need to learn to “swim with the sharks.” While the New Route I outlined is based upon the understanding that parents, athlete and coaches need to learn how to “swim with the dolphins,” to learn how to work collaboratively to achieve the outcomes they seek from sports.

In any team community, parents, athletes and coaches can be found who follow one or the other routes to good sports. There are Sharks who demand that coaches “toughen up” their children by being highly demanding and punitive when they fail to live up to their expectations. And at the same time, there are Dolphins who aspire to have young athletes learn how to empower and nurture their sports partners.

Is it possible to be able to reconcile these two seemingly conflicting approaches to preparing athletes for demanding sports experiences? I like to think it is possible to create a synthesis between what I call the Culture of Conquest where dominance is celebrated, and

the Culture of Care where collaboration is prized. When the Culture of Care challenges the Culture of Conquest, which is beginning to happen in sports, especially since women have been admitted into an historically male world, a synthesis between these two extremes, that I call the Culture of Counterpoint, could very well become the principal approach to sports in America. In the future when the requirements of the times change, we can then expect that the New Route will be challenged by still another unknown approach that is seen as a better fit with society at that point in history. At the moment it seems that our task is to discover how we can best achieve a synthesis of the Old and New Routes to sport that I have identified.

Let me illustrate how these apparent irreconcilable positions can be brought together in a way that will allow the best of both to be reflected in a team community. First of all, both Sharks and Dolphins can agree that it is important for everyone in the team community to have a clear understanding of their respective roles. They may have differences of opinion about how these roles should be played in the sports drama, but that is an issue upon which a compromise can be reached. Through agreeing upon the proper role of parents in their team community it will be possible for parents, athletes and coaches to work together to clarify their respective roles. Secondly, Sharks and Dolphins are both aware of the benefits of developing mutually supportive relationships in a team community. Again while they may place a different amount of emphasis on achieving that end they both agree that supporting one another is important. Sharks are generally less willing to spend time on developing effective relationships, but they would still agree that mutual support in a team community is a valuable goal. Thirdly, both Sharks and Dolphins are aware of the benefits of developing the means for peacefully resolving disputes. They can work together to establish procedures for conflict resolution. And fourthly, they can agree that there are benefits in getting better acquainted with one another so that when differences do in fact arise they will be easier to resolve. And finally, both Sharks and Dolphins can agree to engage in activities that will enhance their understanding of the games their children play. Typically Sharks have greater confidence in their mastery of sports and favor an aggressive and more contentious approach to the games their children play. However, they would welcome witnessing their less informed, (or what some Sharks would refer to as “wimpy,”) fellow parents upgrade their knowledge of the games their children play.

They would also be open to discussions about how, in their everyday encounters with their children, they can best be of assistance

to them as they proceed on their journey through the world of sports. While there undoubtedly will be disagreements among Sharks and Dolphins on how best to “raise a champion” or to “raise a good sport,” with Sharks favoring tougher approaches, there is a good possibility that both Sharks and Dolphins can benefit from discussing with one another how to perform their sports parenting roles. When the Cultures of Conquest and Care clash, the result can be the creation of a Culture of Counterpoint. When this synthesis occurs the best of both perspectives may very well prevail. At the very worst, both Sharks and Dolphins will have been challenged to re-think their own perspective, which is a rare experience for most sports parents under current circumstances.

Can Sharks and Dolphins live peacefully in the same pond? Of course they can. However, they must learn how to live together, for sharing a “pond” or team community is their fate in this transitional era in the history of sport in America. Clearly when a school or club adopts sports policies and practices where parents are granted citizenship in team communities there are bound to be differences of opinion that arise that will present challenges for team leaders. But if the provisions for reconciliation listed above are put into place, safeguards will have been established that will protect against damage being done to the corpus of the team community. These provisions should result, not only in benefits to parents, athletes and coaches, but also in greater overall harmony that will allow for the creation of a mutually supportive team community.

The prospects for a calamity occurring when the lid is taken off the can of worms has been greatly overstated. And the possibility that Sharks and Dolphins will not be able to prosper living together in the same community has been exaggerated.

Clearly, new challenges will be faced when a school or club embarks upon an effort to put into place a program that increases parent involvement in their team communities. I feel confident, however, that when the provisions I have advanced for reconciling differences are adopted, that while the “parent problem” may not disappear, it will be minimized. At the same time the prospects will be enhanced that school sports programs will empower athletes, strengthen families, enliven neighborhoods, make life better for coaches and athletic directors and greatly enhance school-community relationships. These benefits are indeed significant payoffs for investing in preparing parents for constructive involvement in their children’s team communities.

What then is our advice for Ms. McKnight? Should she have taken the risks of opening up a can of worms? Our answer, “Of

Course.” If she follows the guidelines advanced here she will be taking the necessary steps to ensure that the benefits of involving parents in Lincoln’s sports programs are clearly worth the risks. The risks are nearly non-existent if she and her staff take the time to equip parents with the attitudes and skills they need to become contributing citizens in their children’s team communities. In an era when schools are desperate for support, the formation of a cadre of parents who are invested in the school through their involvement in their children’s sports programs, can do much to build confidence in the schools. When this procedure is well orchestrated it cannot help but translate into greater community support for all school programs. When parents are allowed to assume some measure of ownership of their children’s team communities they are much more likely to be there when decisions are being made by policy makers who are establishing school budgets. That’s what good citizens do. And that’s how American democracy works. Not a bad payoff for a very modest investment.

3

Beyond Zero Tolerance: A Strategy for Managing Intrusive Parent Behavior

Dedicated and thoughtful coaches, sports administrators and parents have been losing their patience with the outrageous conduct of a few ugly parents who are ruining sports experiences for athletes, coaches and parents. Many are asking, “Why not simply issue a code of conduct to parents and establish a zero-tolerance policy that will result in the exclusion of those parents who violate the code?” Let me share with you where my experiences in working with sports parents over the past 25 years have taken me.

I have concluded that the best approach to encouraging parents to play a constructive role in their children’s sports communities is to provide opportunities for them to equip themselves with skills that will allow them to become more effective in supporting their children, their coaches and their teams. By placing emphasis upon the positive things parents can do is the first step toward establishing standards of conduct that will be supportive rather than intrusive. It is the first step toward changing the culture of sport.

Zero tolerance codes of conduct issued by sports organizations send the wrong message to parents. Such unilateral actions communicate that the program belongs to the organization and that the parents are aliens who need to be “naturalized” in the laws of the organization and “deported” if they fail to uphold the organization’s code of conduct. Sports organizations could finesse many of their problems with parents with a radically different approach. They could avoid the vast majority of their “parent problems” if they were to treat parents as citizens in their sports communities who are expected to take full advantage of the opportunities their program offers and assume the responsibilities of full citizenship. To achieve full citizenship, parents need to equip themselves to contribute to the well being of the team community. But they also need to be active in fashioning those policies

and practices that impact their lives, including how they and their fellow parents can help the team best achieve its mission.

But will this approach really help manage those few out-of-control parents who cause so many high profile problems? Clearly, no short-term approach will have much effect on those truly troubled souls who are disruptive forces for their children's teams. Our best chance of managing these difficult parents is to establish a climate of mutual support that makes it far more difficult for them to act out and make life miserable for coaches, the athletes, and their fellow parents. By involving parents in creating the boundaries that govern their conduct, sports organizations greatly decrease the prospects that troubled parents will interfere with the smooth running of the sports program. When parents are expected to abide by the guidelines they set for themselves, intrusive parents are then violating, not simply the organization's prohibitions, but also they are breaching the contracts they have written with their fellow parents, the athletes and the coaches. Under these circumstances they are guided by a much more influential boundary-enforcing standard. When parents establish their own standards of conduct they are much more likely to abide by them.

I am convinced that the major problem is not with those few troubled parents who spoil the sports experiences of parents, athletes, and coaches. Instead the problem resides with those sports parenting conventions we have come to unwittingly accept. Much more alarming than the occasional father who gets in the face of a coach is that large group of parents who have not taken the time to examine the consequences of their typical patterns of behavior in their children's lives in sports. I am much more concerned about that large group of parents who boo officials; shout instructions to their children as they compete; intrude into the space of their fellow parents in the bleachers by commenting on the coach's "bad judgment;" push their children into sports when they don't want to be there; and parents who become advocates for their children with their coaches rather than being mentors for their children as they work out their relationships with the coach.

These are not troubled parents. These are not mean spirited parents. These are not stupid parents. These are not negligent parents. These are not self-centered parents who think more about themselves than about their children and their teams. Instead, these are parents who have not yet spent the time thinking through the consequences of their actions and developing the skills that will allow them to effectively support their children and their sports programs. They have not yet taken the time to challenge common sports parenting practices. They

are typically unaware of how their approach to sport is limiting its potential to bring out the best in their children and the other members of their sports communities.

To be successful in creating a mutually supportive sports community, not only do parents need to clean up their own acts so that sport can live up to its promise, they also need to take on the task of helping establish new expectations and standards in their child's sports communities. Without social support it is difficult for most parents to change their ways. When they see fellow parents failing to consider how they are impacting their children, the coaches and the other parent, there is little incentive to change their ways.

A mutually supportive sports community not only can provide an incentive for parents to anticipate the consequences of their actions, it can also inspire them to equip themselves with the skills that will allow them to take advantage of the many opportunities sport offers their children and their families. When a sports community is mutually supportive, parents are more likely to risk themselves in trying new things. In a mutually supportive community parents find themselves in a better position to take advantage of those enriching experiences provided by becoming an integral part of that community.

In a mutually supportive sports community parents are able to use sport as a source of renewal for themselves and for their families; as a place where they can learn more about themselves as they experience the stress of witnessing your children in sports; where they can develop the kinds of supportive relations with their children that make their lives together more enjoyable; where they can use their children's sports experiences to teach life lessons; where they can expand the range of experiences that sport has to offer; where they can develop friendships with other sports families; and where they can mobilize others to help them realize their vision of good sports.

Let's develop sports communities where conventional standards of parent conduct are challenged so that sport can realize its full promise. Mutually supportive sports communities allow everyone to become deeply involved in what they are doing and closely connected with those with whom they are doing it in ways that bring out the best in everyone. Your sports community can realize its promise when you and your fellow parents work together with athletes and coaches to chart a mutually supportive course of action.

4

Charm School for Coaches: Can You Imagine That?

Charming people manage to make others who venture into their sphere leave feeling like their ideal selves.

O The Oprah Magazine, November, 2003

Those enrolled in charm school learn how to prepare themselves for establishing satisfying connections with the people in their lives. The goal of enrolling in a charm school is to make oneself more attractive and likeable. To achieve that end charm school students learn how to dress nearly so that people will be attracted to them. They learn how to look and smell good. They learn how to be polite and display respect and consideration for others. They learn how to express themselves with language designed not to offend. They learn to avoid spitting, scratching, picking their nose, ears, and teeth in public. They learn good manners, when to say “thank you,” “yes, please,” “yes sir” and “yes ma’am.”

They know to speak clearly, softly, and enthusiastically, but always under control. Never say things for their shock value. They avoid cursing, shouting and screaming. They learn the value of smiling a lot for they appreciate how an upbeat attitude picks up the spirits of others. They learn to stand tall, never allowing themselves to openly express frustration and anger through either words or body language. They learn how to listen carefully to those with whom they are talking so as to be able to connect with their interests and passions. They learn how to avoid talking about themselves and to take great care not to dominate a conversation. They learn how to relate to their fellow men and women in a manner that makes them feel good about being in their presence. Most importantly they learn how to embrace the dreams of others, as if they were their own. In short, they learn how to be charming.

It is very energizing and uplifting to be around genuinely charming people who have the capacity to make you believe they appreciate you for who you are, not for what you can do for them or for what you might become. Their charm is effortless, authentic, not forced or studied. They recognize you for the special person you are. With so many encounters with people who make us feel like we are simply convenient witnesses to their private worlds, it is really exciting to find yourself in the presence of a truly charming person who “leaves you feeling like your ideal self.” What a wonderful experience that is to be in the presence of a charming person.

For as long as I have been involved in sports, which is in excess of 67 years, I have never, not even one time, heard a coach referred to as “charming.” Why is that? Possibly Coach Jeff Van Gundy, of the Houston Rockets had the answer when he suggested that coaches are defined by what they do. He is quoted as saying, “Singers sing, coaches dictate.” It is hard to be charming when you are making demands of those around you.

Labeling a coach “charming” would be laughable and even insulting to hardcore jocks. People in nearly every occupation have enjoyed the “charming” label from time to time, even military officers, but not coaches. Is coaching like being a drill sergeant, a jailor, or an executioner where circumstances do not lend themselves to being charming? Maybe so. But even funeral directors can be described as charming. So why not coaches?

Is it because the culture of coaching discourages its members from entering into the personal lives of athletes and their parents? Is it because the coaching fraternity is guided by the belief that if coaches engage in intimate dialogue with athletes and their parents they run the risk of limiting their effectiveness as taskmasters who need to drive their athletes to excellence? Is it that coaches feel the need to be demanding and controlling, to be empowered to discipline athletes who fall short of meeting their performance standards?

Is it that coaches believe they need to maintain distance between themselves and their athletes for fear that those with whom they have developed close relationships will take advantage of them and hence compromise their credibility with the other athletes? It is my observation that the majority of the coaching community embraces these beliefs.

Most coaches believe, “If I allow myself to get close to athletes, I will lose control of the team and risk becoming a loser.” It should be apparent that this logic acts as a barrier to building mutually supportive

team communities. Most coaches have come to believe that they can lose control and the respect that goes with the position of coach if they allow themselves to get close to their athletes. Furthermore, they run the risk of being accused of showing favorites, which they rightly understand can cause serious damage to team chemistry.

The fundamental question then is “Is it possible for coaches to make athletes “feel like their ideal selves” and at the same time provide them with corrective feedback, maintain discipline, and motivate them to improve. Can they make their athletes feel like their ideal selves without showing favorites? I ask, is it possible for a coach to be charming and still maintain control of his or her team?”

Inherent in the structure of sport and hence supported by the traditions of sport is the expectation that all athletes will attempt to become everything they can become. Grade school athletes are told that they are getting ready for junior high school, high school athletes for college, college athletes for the pros, the pros to become an all-star, an all-star to become an MVP, and an MVP to be inducted into the Hall of Fame. It is a never-ending journey. In the sports system athletes are never permitted the satisfaction of being completely fulfilled by their accomplishments. They live in a world in which they are not allowed to experience themselves inside the skin of their ideal selves.

Athletes are always in a state of incompleteness, always becoming rather than being. Tradition in sport causes coaches and parents to remind athletes of their shortcomings rather than recognizing their assets and achievements. This tradition makes it difficult for them to feel like they are their ideal selves.

Coaching traditions support the idea that in order to help athletes realize their potential it is necessary to constantly have them work on overcoming their weaknesses. If they are slow, they need to learn how to run faster. If they cannot jump high, they need to work on their jumping ability. If they are weak they are put on a weight lifting regimen. How can athletes feel that a coach is charming when he or she is charged with the task of overcoming their deficiencies, when the culture of sport reminds them that they are incomplete, and when they are often encouraged to adopt ideals that are outside the realm of possibility, for example, to earn a college scholarship, a benefit that is only available to about 1-2% of high school athletes?

What can coaches and parents do to counter the impact of sports traditions that result in discounting the achievements of their children by reminding them that they have not really arrived at the ultimate destination? We typically make them feel that wherever they

land, there is still a great distance to travel. They are always in a state of transformation, rather than in a state of enchantment where they are deeply involved in what they are doing and closely connected to those with whom they are doing it. Their actions are guided by what I like to call the Protean Ethic, which demands that athletes constantly work to transform themselves into a new and improved self that can adapt to the requirements of the next level on the sports ladder. Most coaches as well as moms and dads are carriers of this dominant ethic of transformation.

The Making of a Charming Coach

What actions can coaches take to become more “charming,” that is, how can they learn how to help their athletes feel like their ideal selves in spite of their daily encounters with the Sisyphean Burden, that never-ending task of having to roll a boulder up the hill, only to have it roll down again just before it reaches the top? The question is “How can coaches achieve their traditional objectives of producing winners, while at the same time allowing their athletes to remain in the here and now, mastering skills that will allow them to become deeply involved in what they are doing and closely connected to those with whom they are doing it?” How can coaches help make sport an enchanting experience rather than a burdensome labor? Could the answer be, “Make your athletes feel like their ideal selves.” Or put another way, be more charming.

Could it be that it will be necessary to send coaches to “charm school” if we expect them to learn how to be more charming so that they are better equipped to create mutually supportive team communities? It would seem that a curriculum for helping coaches become more charming would need to include the following units of study:

- a. How to dress neatly
- b. How to look and smell good
- c. How to display good manners- when to say “thank you,” etc.
- d. How to avoid spitting, scratching, picking your nose, ears and teeth in public
- e. How to speak clearly, softly, and enthusiastically, but always under control
- f. How to stand tall, never allowing yourself to openly express frustration and anger through either words or body language
- g. How to write thank you notes and give gifts as expressions of gratitude

- h. How to display respect and consideration for others
- i. How to listen carefully to those with whom you are talking so as to be able to connect with their interests and passions
- j. How to express yourself without using language that offends
- k. How to avoid saying things for their shock value
- l. How to avoid talking about yourself and dominating conversations with your “wise” observations about the world
- m. How to relate to your fellow men and women in a manner that makes them feel good about being in your presence
- n. How to embrace the dreams of their athletes, as if they were their own

Does this list sound familiar? Of course it does. It is a list of questions that would be addressed in any serious human relations training program. It is a list of those things all the way from the trivial (how one smells) to the profound (how to embrace their athlete’s dreams), a list that would be offered in any training of a person for success in life.

Actions Parents Can Take

What actions do parents need to take so that their children feel like their ideal selves in spite of their daily encounters with the Sisphyian Burden?

1. Listen carefully to determine what it is your children want to be, so that you are supporting their ambitions, not yours or the coach’s.
2. Get to know your children so that you can learn how to help them feel like their ideal selves, in spite of all the social forces making it difficult for them to enjoy being themselves in the here and now.
3. Direct your attention away from the scoreboard, away from your own dreams, away from the coach’s ambitions. Instead develop an awareness that it is going on in the here and now of competition that engages most young athletes, not where they will be next week, next season or five years from now. Focusing on the future is always a distraction and will undoubtedly negatively impact their performance on the playing field and diminish their enjoyment.
4. Learn how to stroke your children so that they genuinely believe they

are being their ideal self, not becoming someone else's ideal.

5. Give them a voice for celebrating their achievements in the here and now. Do not dwell on how their achievements have opened doors to advancing to the next level.

While it may be wishful thinking that your children's coaches will choose to learn how to be more charming, you can at least gain an appreciation of what your children are missing in their relationships with their coaches. By understanding this void in your children's lives in sports you may be less likely to add to their sense of failure, where they conclude that they are unworthy of recognition, praise and love. You can work to compensate for any sense of incompleteness they are experiencing by remaining focused on their achievements in the here and now and by refraining from talking about their readiness for moving "up" to the next level.

I am not suggesting that it is inappropriate for athletes to embrace goals for themselves. Instead I am recommending that these goals be their own, not yours or their coaches. Further, these goals need to be short term and achievable so that your children are able to become their ideal selves. At least you can be charming, even if their coaches are failing them. Your home needs to be a sanctuary from the pressures your children experience both in and out of sports. Your role as a parent is clear. As Oprah says "make others who venture into your sphere leave feeling like their ideal selves." And I would add, "especially your own children who are submerged in the shark infested waters of school and youth sports."

5

Now Isn't That Convenient: Questioning the Myth of Fabricated Adversity

“The only way of justifying this myth is to conclude that winning is more important than the development of athletes as self-reliant citizens.”

Any parent who has ever gone to the gym for a workout understands that in order to get into shape it is necessary to push yourself until it hurts. Discomfort is an essential feature of physical training. “No Pain, No Gain” has legitimacy when applied to preparing yourself physically for competition. But some sports trainers have concluded that athletes also need to be toughened up psychologically. They need to learn how to manage mental pain if they are to become true champions. These coaches believe they get the best results from young athletes by fabricating adversity to prepare them for the difficult challenges they will face on the playing field. In short, I am referring here to those “in-your-face” coaches who use verbal assaults to motivate their athletes whenever they fail to live up to their expectations. These aggressive coaches employ verbal attacks whenever their athletes fail to execute skills or implement the prescribed game plan or do not display a “good attitude.” Riding their athletes, even when it causes obvious pain and suffering, they claim, produces mental toughness. The attention they heap on athletes they are attempting to strengthen, they insist, demonstrates that they truly care about their development. They claim to be applying the principle of “tough love.”

This is not an alien concept to most parents. Most of us have at one point or another justified harsh discipline as being evidence that we really love our children. “I screamed at you, Honey, because I really care about what happens to you. I want you to have a good life and if you continue doing what you are doing you are headed for trouble. To spank you hurts me more than it hurt you.” Oh, my, how convenient that explanation is for explaining away our loss of emotional control!

Most of us have heard that pitch at some time or another from our moms and dads? We should not be surprised, then, if coaches are of the same mind when they justify harsh treatment of athletes who fail to perform up to their standards. They claim to have their athlete's best interest at heart. For some of us it is hard to buy that argument given the pressure to be successful that many coaches experience. Thoughtful observers cannot avoid suspecting that the pressure has gotten to these coaches and that they have found themselves responding out of unrestrained frustration and anger rather than out of a calculated attempt to develop mental toughness. Typically both parents and coaches feel better when they rationalize their conduct as being in the best interest of the young person, rather than acknowledging that it is the result of their failure to show restraint. As comedian Dana Carvey's Church Lady would say, "Now, isn't that convenient." It is convenient to have cultural myths to justify our loss of emotional control, isn't it?

Some high profile coaches regularly rationalize mental toughness training as essential for those athletes who have not enjoyed the benefits of family life populated by a strong authority figure. Quite frequently the objects of these verbal attacks are African-American males who have lived troubled lives in less than ideal family situations. These coaches imply that they are acting as "saviors" of the downtrodden, rescuing them from a cycle of failure and poverty. They see themselves giving athletes in need a chance at the good life through sports. They describe their relentless assaults on these athletes as "tough love," making it plain that this type of treatment is exactly what many of today's undisciplined, but talented athletes need. These coaches are typically resistant to any challenges to a myth that justifies a violation of the dignity of their charges. Many of these coaches find it difficult to consider the possibility that they might be wrong.

I have chosen to refer to this common sports training practice as "fabricated adversity," which can be defined as the purposeful production of psychological stress and pain for purposes of preparing athletes for any competitive eventuality they might face. Coaches who employ this approach apparently do not believe that there is enough adversity in the natural flow of competition to "toughen up" their athletes. They feel they have to fabricate pain and suffering in order to hasten learning to perform well under pressure. The question I am addressing is whether fabricated adversity is abuse or tough love as the true believers of this training practice confidently claim?

The belief in the efficacy of verbal assaults is so pervasive that many athletes have actually come to believe the myth that they

are unable to perform at their best unless they are “pushed” by their “adoptive parent.” In other words, they feel they can only succeed when they are being threatened, screamed at, punished, and even demeaned by their coach. It may, indeed, be the case that some athletes “need” to be driven by verbally aggressive coaches in order to perform at the top of their game. But does that justify assaults on their dignity? I think not.

We need to question why the world of sports has so completely bought into a myth that assigns so much benefit to the experiences of fabricated adversity? One answer is that there are, indeed, athletes who “need” the harsh “challenge” that the fabricators of adversity provide. But is this a healthy, normal need? I think not. One goal of education of all sorts, including sports education, is to submit to the kinds of discipline that promotes self-sufficiency. When students “need” a mentor to drive them to achieve, they have definitely not learned the skills, attitudes and values that allow them to become self-sufficient. Instead, when coaches “push” them they are learning how to be dependent upon a demanding authority figure to maximize their performance. The only way of justifying this myth is to conclude that winning is more important than the development of athletes as self-reliant citizens.

While abusive coaches often refer to their approach as “tough love,” the media generously describe these tough taskmasters as “disciplinarians” or “master motivators,” and celebrate those rare cases when one of these coaches is credited with saving athletes from themselves by demanding unquestioning obedience to their rules. They fail to report the hundreds of thousands of young athletes who are sufficiently dispirited by these techniques early in their sports careers to drop out of the sports system all together before their situations reach media attention. The media love to report rare cases of rehabilitation, but give club, school and college dropouts little or no attention unless they happen to be superstars. Even when they report dropouts they imply they are troubled souls who were unable to adjust to the standard expectations of sports training. They find it easy to write off those cases where “tough love” has simply exacerbated the problems athletes have in becoming self-reliant. While the media have bought into to the idea that the end justifies the means, that is, that verbal abuse is warranted when you consider the success the objects of the coach’s abuse enjoy on the playing field, they fail to chronicle the ends for the vast majority of victims of abuse. For most abused athletes the ends are indeed the ends of their careers in sports.

It is generally very difficult for anyone on the receiving end

of verbal assaults by renowned “motivators” to develop the kind of confidence in themselves that will allow them to succeed at whatever tasks they undertake in sport and life. Verbal abuse and the subjugation to authoritarianism undermines both the development of self-reliance and self-confidence, qualities that everyone agrees are essential for making one’s way through life with ease and effectiveness.

Why then, would any athlete choose to put up with the abuse that is legendary among many of the nations most recognizable coaches and the tens of thousands of their imitators pacing the sidelines of school and youth sports playing fields? The answer can be found at two levels. First, there are some athletes who refuse to grow up, for any number of reasons. This is especially the case for those athletes who have grown accustomed to being coached by dictatorial coaches over their entire sports careers, from tiny tots to the pros. They feel the need to be guided through their lives in sports and therefore to escape the discomfort that taking responsibility for their own actions sometimes creates. In addition, there are athletes who have developed a dependent, compliant personality as a result of their upbringing by their parents. There are also other athletes who have developed masochistic personalities for whatever reasons. These sorry souls seek out the punishment they feel they deserve as they try to atone for the “sins” they are convinced they have committed.

Part of the explanation, then, for the willingness of athletes to submit to the discipline of harsh taskmasters can be found in the immature or twisted personalities of some athletes. The roots of their masochistic character can be found in their early childhood experiences. Another possible explanation for a predisposition to put up with abusive coaching resides in the myth that has been perpetuated over the generations about the benefits of experiencing fabricated adversity in a concerted effort to develop the mental toughness necessary to prevail in highly competitive, risk filled, high stakes sports at the college and professional levels. It has long been a part of the common wisdom among males in our culture that in order to get ahead in the cutthroat real world “out there” it is necessary to be prepared for the inevitable adversity one faces in traveling the rough road to success.

The military has used this type of verbal abuse in hazing trainees for many generations. For decades the military metaphor has prevailed in the world of sports where coaches are identified as “field generals” and sports competitions described as “battles” or “shoot outs.” The male populations in America, and increasingly today’s women sports leaders, have bought into this military way of thinking about human motivation.

“In-your-face” coaching has become the norm in many places and at many levels, and parents have come to expect that their children, indeed, are privileged when they are selected to train with “real disciplinarians,” a euphemism for a verbally abusive coach. Witness the lineup of parents willing to submit their daughters to the old school discipline of gymnastics coach, Bela Karoli. Therefore, not only do we have needy athletes jumping at chances to work with dictatorial coaches, but we also have a sports system that has glorified abuse as a form of preparing athletes to “swim with the sharks.” Remember, no pain, no gain.

James Mitchner in *Sports in America* reported that he personally would be unwilling to submit to the demands of a tyrannical coach unless a college scholarship was his only way to escape the destiny of a disadvantaged upbringing. He seemed to be saying that only the under-classes would be willing to put up with abuse in order to transcend their humble beginnings. Clearly, many of the athletes who submit to coaching abuse are from the under-classes whose futures look bleak, unless they submit to the tyranny of a dictatorial coach who they have been led to believe will be able to help them rise above their roots. Where does this line of thinking lead? It leads me to conclude that fabricated adversity justified in the name of toughening up athletes so that they can prevail in critical sports and life situations does athletes and sport a real disservice. First of all, it takes sport out of the category of education and puts it instead in the ranks of training (as in mindless animal training). When we watch the way coaches today call every play from the sideline we are reminded of the lack of confidence they have in athletes to make informed decisions on the playing field. “Just do what I say, let me do the thinking,” they are in fact communicating by their actions. Education opens up new possibilities for the learner, whereas training limits learners to cope only with those activities for which they have been specifically prepared. Equally destructive, being yelled at takes all the fun out of the activity, not only for the athletes themselves, but for many witnesses as well. For most of us it is not fun watching another person being psychologically destroyed and demeaned or to watch coaches stomping up and down the sidelines decrying every misstep their athletes take and denying them the satisfaction of being in charge of their life on the playing field. If they are forced to look to the sideline every time they make a decision, how can they become deeply involved in what they are doing? How can they have a feeling of energy, total immersion and satisfaction from an activity that is being interrupted after every play? These interruptions do violence to the very

essence of sport. They remove the possibility that sport will be able to renew the spirits of those athletes who are being “disturbed” by their coaches.

The word *disturbed* has relevance for these situations in two ways. Coaches “interrupt” the flow of the activity and they “upset” the athletes under attack by their sideline antics. Abusive coaches violate the sanctuary of sport by making it impossible for sport to perform its most central function, that is, to renew the human spirit. Abuse does not renew. To the contrary, it destroys the human spirit. Furthermore, purposely hurting another human being to achieve your own ends, that is, to enhance your win-loss record, is a violation of the golden rule of sport – “Do unto your sports mates as you would have them do unto you.” I have come to believe that fabricated adversity is justification for satisfying the perverted needs of many coaches. Unfortunately, the culture of sport not only tolerates the pathology of abusive coaches, but it also celebrates a most demeaning and distracting pattern of conduct. Witness the case of basketball legend, Bobby Knight, who has been revered everywhere he has gone for his winning ways, in spite of horrendous violations of his athletes. The reverence with which Bobby Knight, the poster boy of the “Greats of Wrath,” is held is a constant reminder to all of us as to how completely the world of sports has embraced the Myth of Fabricated Adversity.

Consideration for the well being of our fellow men and women is central to living the good life in a civil society. It is not possible to justify morally what some of these coaches do to their athletes in order to achieve their personal ends. It is sheer exploitation, especially when it involves those athletes from the under-classes who are being held in virtual servitude because of their limited life choices. Verbal abuse by coaches is not simply an error of judgment, it is a “sin” that defies justification, no matter how lofty the explanation appears when the advocates for fabricated adversity are challenged by their detractors. The “No Pain, No Gain” defense is truly a myth perpetuated by coaches as a calculated strategy to enhance the skills and the sports futures of their charges. But in reality it is a justification for the coach’s emotional immaturity or deficiency in emotional intelligence. This myth needs to be exposed for what it is - self-serving self-deception.

Some would suggest that excluding abusers from the ranks of coaching would stamp out this cancer that has invaded the corpus of sport. Unfortunately, excluding high profile true believers in this myth will not cure this out of control epidemic of craziness. (It deserves to be called crazy because it is an irrational belief that causes pain and

suffering.) The roots of this malaise reside, not only in the demented souls of abusers, or in the tragic underdevelopment of those who are abused, but also in the very core of the culture of sport in America. So many men and women, of all ages are carriers of the myth of fabricated adversity, making this epidemic of insanity extraordinarily resistant to eradication.

How then can we expect these “sinners” to be rooted out so that the renewal qualities of sport can be restored? Clearly a witch-hunt is not the solution for any number of reasons, not the least of which is that it is not realistic to legislate the elimination of a long-standing pervasive cultural myth. But it may be realistic to expect that those people who have the greatest stake in restoring sanity to sports, the parents of young athletes who genuinely want their children to be treated with respect, can work together on a team-by-team basis to create incentives for coaches to reassess the cultural norms that permit, or better yet, encourage and reward abusive coaching behavior. How can this reassessment occur when the norms permitting abuse are so pervasive?

It will first of all be necessary to raise the consciousness of parents about the damage being perpetuated by this myth. Since most parents typically have not had the experience of repeatedly justifying abusive actions on the playing field as have coaches, it is quite possible that simply helping them understand the unanticipated consequences of abusive actions will be enough to send them on a mission to protect their children from the impact of this myth.

While finding a way to reverse this pattern is indeed a perplexing and overwhelming challenge, we have reason to be encouraged when we turn to the parent community to become the initiators for rethinking this pervasive myth. Parents are often prepared to buy into the myth when it is applied to other people’s children who they view as lacking discipline. But most parents are unwilling to accept abuse when it is heaped upon their own children. It is for this reason I am arguing that parents need to become significant players in shaping the future of school and youth sports programs.

Parents can only help fashion new directions in sports by investing in becoming informed and constructive citizens in their children’s sports communities. Witch hunting for violators is not the answer. Parents will not be successful in bringing about change without equipping themselves with the skills that will allow them to work collaboratively with their own children, the other athletes on their children’s teams, the coaches and their fellow parents to enhance sports programs.

This effort to challenge the Myth of Fabricated Adversity, is very labor intensive. The question is not whether it is possible for parents to become major players in the lives of their children in sports. The question becomes, “Are they willing to invest in making sport a better place for their children, their families and their communities?” It is clear that there are few if any incentives for the coaching community to take initiatives to challenge this myth. Who among them has the courage to throw the first stone? Most coaches have lost their cool often enough to feel as though they may have been guilty of embracing the view that adversity produces the toughness athletes need in order to succeed. Most coaches, however, have some doubts as to whether this approach to preparing athletes for adversity is necessary. Therefore, while I am not looking to coaches to be initiators of reform, I am of the belief that many of them would be relieved to have someone else challenge this myth and demand that it be reassessed as a mainstay in the coach’s toolbox.

I may be dreaming when I draw these conclusions about coaches and parents, but what other choice do we have except to continue to perpetuate a dysfunctional belief system? I find it necessary to conclude that an active and informed parent community is our only chance of challenging a feature of sports training for children that is damaging the to children, their families, their communities, the institution of sport of itself, and ultimately to the coaching profession. We have no other choice but to become a part of a movement to equip parents to become constructive contributors to enhancing sports experiences for their children.

Parents, this reform process may be fraught with conflict and pain. But remember, “No pain, No gain.” The difference, of course, is that the pain I am describing is not fabricated, it is indeed natural, real, and necessary for ensuring the well being of our children, our families, our communities and the institution of sport itself.

6

Coach Almighty: Are Coaches Unwittingly Sucking the Spirit Out of Our Children?

It seems as though Jim Carrey, the star of *Bruce Almighty* is not the only mortal to be endowed with god-like powers. As I witness my beloved Houston Rockets race up and down the court, I am impressed with how often these incredible athletes look over to the bench for guidance. It seems as if there is not a time when the team moves from offense to defense or defense to offense that the coach is not shouting instructions to his players. It is amazing to me that these coaches, most of whom are excellent teachers, cannot trust these twenty to forty-year-old extraordinary athletes who have been playing the game for as long as 10 to 30 years to make intelligent choices on the court. Apparently there is no one on the team the coach can count on to know what needs to be done on a play-by-play basis. Have these athletes not been adequately trained to know how to work with their teammates to meet the challenges presented by their opponents? If that is the case, it is sad that at this point in their careers they have not yet developed the competencies or confidence to execute a game plan without the coach calling out instructions on nearly every play. What a contrast to the games in which these talented Rockets cut their teeth when they were children in the play yards of the nation's cities.

Maybe I am just being nostalgic when I recall the days when basketball coaches remained on the bench and trusted the team captain to know how to make adjustment to the moves by the opposition. I know that it may seem quaint to today's athletes and coaches that there was a day when quarterbacks called their own plays based upon how the defense lined up without any help from the coaching staff, rather than depending upon a coach in a box high above the field to transmit plays through their headsets. Increasingly athletes have been robbed of the opportunity to assert leadership on the playing field at all levels, in many team sports.

Most of us who have grown up male have vivid memories of the joys of sandlot sports where we established our own game plans and

enforced our own rules without any interference from experts, unless it was one of our older “brothers” who gave us unsolicited tips when we screwed up, or showed us “the way” by beating us to the basket. We learned to take responsibility for our own actions, to take control of our lives in sport so that we could experience the joy of mastering and performing sports skills on our own terms. That was enough for us. The sheer enchantment of being engaged in competition brought us enormous satisfaction and kept us on the courts until darkness set in.

Then we were introduced to “Coach Almighty” with his commandment, “My way or the highway.” We quickly learned not to make a move that departed from his directives unless we wanted to lose favor with mellow coaches or become the object of the wrath of the screamers. It should not be surprising that 70% of the children drop out of sports by age 13. Is it any wonder that grown men playing in the professional leagues still find it necessary to regularly look to the bench for guidance?

Sport is not alone in producing experts who have persuaded the populace that their services are essential if their “clients” are to be winners in life. Doctors, lawyers, accountants, business consultants, teachers, psychologists and all of us “professionals” depend upon the Myth of Professional Necessity to sustain our profession and us. This myth states that professional expertise is required to solve the increasingly complex problems of our era. God help those who try to treat their own ailments, represent themselves in a court of law, prepare their own taxes, or heal their souls etc. There are ambitious professionals around every corner and under every rock who are unwittingly making an effort to diminish our sense of competency. They nearly always have good intentions. They have been made to feel that they were born to serve their clients, a virtue, I guess. No longer do ordinary citizens need to turn to mom, dad or grandmother for time-tested counsel when they face a problem. What would these family members know about healing the sick, defending their rights, or filing their taxes in this day and age? Instead we have come to believe that we need to consult an expert before we can act. We have all subjugated ourselves to the pros, haven't we? By so doing we have unwittingly increased our sense of impotence and diminished the strength of our families by not trusting the judgment of the seasoned souls in our midst. What wisdom could parents or grandparents possibly possess? Change has left these dinosaurs in the dust! They have no degrees or certificates, and even when they do they are seen as “being out of touch.” How could they help us? By failing to trust the judgment of the senior

members of our families and communities we have, in effect, declared the older generation irrelevant.

As a senior myself, I have observed that my contemporaries are actually relieved not to have to bear the burden of risking giving advice. By moving to Florida, Arizona or California they have freed themselves from the ugliness of everyday family issues and crises. The golf course and card table insulate them from the realities of today's rapidly changing world. What a deal! But at what price? We old folks have therefore become co-conspirators with experts. We are unwittingly aiding them in sucking the power out of the young and old alike. We are mindlessly contributing to our own sense of impotence. The experts have now become the wise men and wise women in our culture. Too bad. Yes, too bad, indeed.

Do we really need to make young athletes feel impotent with a battalion of professional drill sergeants who fear they may lose control of their troops? Do we really need to turn our children over to professional sports experts to induct them into a Culture of Obedience where conformity is king and creativity and individuality are treated as sins? Is it possible that the tattoos, earrings and wild "dos" are ways many of today's athletes assert their individuality and independence from authority figures who are controlling their every move on and off the court? We should not be surprised to find professional and collegiate athletes asserting themselves through risky off-court assertions of their independence. Police blotters all across the nation are marked by incidents that have the markings of bold gestures taken by athletes to test the limits of authority.

Life in the world of sports seldom does much to promote maturity, in spite of all the pronouncements to the contrary. As legendary coach John Wooden has often said, "Sport does not build character. Instead, sport reflects character." I would add that sport might actually retard the development of character in many cases, by keeping young people in a state of dependence.

Do not interpret what I am saying as an endorsement of undisciplined sports training. That is a misreading of my intent. My concern is that the culture of sport increasingly promotes dependency and hence immaturity. This dependency upon controlling and dictatorial coaches keeps young athletes from becoming deeply involved in the games they play, thus robbing them of opportunities to experience the joy of being fully immersed in the competition where sport can perform its primary function of renewing the human spirit. Also the dependency on the coach sucks sources of initiative from athletes so that they feel

the need for the rigid structure imposed by the coach.

Maturity requires both courage and compassion. It seems that dictatorial coaches do little to promote either. Far too few intense coaches foster courage. In addition, they often model insensitivity to the emotional well being of those around them by routinely “getting in their face.” How can athletes develop courage and compassion in a world where the almighty experts have convinced them, their parents and the general public that they are indispensable and therefore have the right to control the athlete’s every move?

Well-prepared coaches are indeed necessary for any thoughtfully conceived sports program. All athletes, even the most gifted, need feedback and guidance to fully develop their talents. But for young athletes to be able to develop maturity as well as athletic skills, it is essential that they be discouraged from becoming dependent upon coaches who feel the need to convince their athletes that they cannot be trusted to make their own decisions. Athletes need to believe that they are participating in shaping the direction of their team and in defining their role on that team.

It is a scary task for most coaches to invite athletes to help shape the direction of their training and competition. Athletes typically respond with disbelief. In the current climate, it is not easy for coaches to sit quietly on the bench and offer advice only during timeouts. Such a change would make both coaches and athletes uncomfortable. It takes time, effort, skill, perseverance and the development of self-confidence for a coach to equip athletes with the skills and courage to take charge of their own lives in sports.

Today’s professional coaches feel tremendous pressure from parents, administrators, spectators, and even athletes to produce winners. This makes it difficult for them to consider changing their ways for fear they will lose control.

How can coaches, athletes and parents be persuaded that athletes have the right to become deeply involved in what they are doing so that they can experience the “flow” of the sports experience without rude interruptions from dispiriting voices from the sidelines? How can we prepare coaches so that they no longer feel the need to behave like indispensable “experts?” How can we restore to athletes and their families some measure of control over what occurs in their team communities?

It seems highly unlikely that coaches will lead a movement to transform their roles from being regimented taskmasters to becoming facilitators of the dreams of athletes and their families. That seems

like a big leap for most coaches to make without a mighty powerful incentive.

Many coaches are already fed up with parents and administrators who interfere with their control over their isolated fiefdoms. They typically fight every effort to become accountable for their actions, beyond their win-loss record. In addition, sports administrators seldom, if ever, offer mentoring to either school or club coaches, nor do coaches take advantage of offers by administrators to be of assistance.

What actions can parents take to help sport become an activity where their children develop the courage and compassion to become contributing members of their teams, schools, families and communities? What can parents do to help make sports fun again for their children? If the vicious cycle of in-your-face sports is to be interrupted, parents need to become significant players in transforming the culture of sport for children. Parents cannot depend upon coaches alone to step up to the plate and take the risks involved in changing their ways.

Parents, especially moms, need to become midwives for the birth of a new era in sports for children, an era where parents and athletes join with coaches in creating opportunity expanding team communities where sport can be made fun again. When parent-athlete-coach teams are formed where everyone assumes a role appropriate to their knowledge and experience, it may be possible to interrupt the sports traditions that foster dependency and disrespect.

Maturity can only be promoted when athletes are assigned rights and responsibilities in team communities tailored to their level of experience. Then, and only then, can sport realize its full potential as a source of empowerment that derives from helping children develop into full-fledged citizens in their sports communities. We need to transition to an era of “Almighty Athletes,” young men and women who have learned how to advance their interests in ways that contribute to the creation of vibrant team communities founded upon the principle of mutual respect. Amen!

But wait, this is not the end. Instead it is only the beginning of an era where the culture of sport is challenged to adjust to the requirements of the times. We need more young people to develop their skills for becoming contributing citizens on their teams, in their schools, neighborhoods and communities. While we need to empower athletes in ways that promote their maturity, we also need to worship the “Almighty Team Community” where parents, athletes and coaches can turn for the nurture and support they all need if sport is to perform its functions of

inspiring, enabling, and uniting.

This essay was written as a tribute to my colleague, John L. Mc Knight, whose influence is reflected in everything I have done for over a third of a century.

7

The Search for Ways of Mobilizing Coaches In Support of Parent Involvement

If coaches are to be mobilized to support increased parent involvement in the life of school and youth sports team it will be necessary for parents to equip themselves to work with coaches, athletes and athletic administrators to address the following questions:

1. Where will coaches find the time to tool up for changing their approach to coaching?

Most coaches feel that they do not currently have enough time to prepare their athletes for competition. They would find it difficult to know what to omit from their training regimen. Any tasks that would be added by efforts to involve parents would be seen as a distraction and a burden.

2. How can coaches be reassured that a new approach to sports will not damage their win-loss record?

Many coaches are unwilling to risk adopting an approach that could diminish their record of success on the playing field. Since coaching rewards are determined almost exclusively by the performance of their athletes, they feel they cannot afford to take the time away from teaching fundamental skills to try an untested approach to sports.

3. How can part-time coaches, who can only make limited commitments to coaching, be convinced that they need to take time from their tight schedules to re-tool for a new approach to sports?

Large numbers in the coaching ranks are part-time, many of who are either volunteers or receive only token compensation. Part-time coaches typically are unprepared to make an investment in changing their ways because they feel they cannot afford the time to re-tool themselves.

4. How can coaches be made comfortable with identifying themselves as a part of the problem without getting defensive and dismissing critical evaluations of current coaching traditions?

Many coaches are, indeed, a part of the problem. While they feel that things are not right in their situations they have difficulty understanding how their own behavior is contributing to the problem. They often see the problem residing with “lazy and self-centered athletes,” “unreasonable, pushy parents,” “out of touch administrators,” and/or “declining social values.”

5. How can coaches discover that the approaches they are currently using may be teaching their athletes attitudes and values that some parents would conclude are dysfunctional in today’s world?

Coaches are typically unprepared to defend their views when challenged. If parents were provided opportunities to voice their views coaches would be opening themselves up to having to manage these public conversations. The perspective on sports of many coaches is Darwinian, where a “survival of the fittest” view prevails. This view typically emphasizes ranking over linking and can result in a “win-at-any cost” approach to coaching that some parents find at odds with their values. These coaches could find themselves in conflict with parents who reject that perspective on sport and life. Most coaches are unequipped to clearly justify their position and to respectfully debate their views with parents, which can result in a “my way or the highway” approach to dealing with parents.

6. How can coaches be encouraged to step back and view what they are doing from a more objective vantage point?

Many coaches are too vested in the current system to be objective.

They see no advantages in changing those sports policies and practices with which they are currently comfortable, even though they understand that all is not well in the world of sports for children.

7. How can coaches be engaged in self-examination where they are provided opportunities to establish their identity with an alternative approach to sport?

The personal identity of many coaches is so intimately linked to a “Dog Eat Dog,” Culture of Conquest perspective on sport that they find it difficult to consider alternatives. The changes proposed by parent initiatives could require learning a new set of coaching skills and would necessitate a significant change in their value system.

8. How can coaches be encouraged to expand their worldview so that it will allow them to be open to new possibilities?

Many coaches have a narrow worldview. The worldview of some coaches may not be compatible with some parent-recommended team policies and practices.

9. How can the life experiences of coaches be expanded so that they are able to develop a broader view of sport in the lives of parents, athletes, and coaches?

The life experiences of many coaches are limited. The selection process, the demands of coaching and low economic rewards limit opportunities for coaches to develop a broad range of interests and skills. Their parent’s more expansive experiences may lead them to view sport differently. These different viewpoints can lead to conflict for which coaches are unprepared.

10. How can coaches be provoked to challenge the status quo in sports?

The coaching field tends to attract conservative individuals who are uninterested in challenging the system. Coaches seldom actively challenge current policies and practices in any sector of their lives. Many coaches are upwardly mobile and therefore do not want to compromise the gains they are making by challenging the system.

11. How can coaches be made more comfortable with taking risks?

Coaching tends to attract low risk takers. Many coaches are unwilling to try new things in their coaching, unless they can see a clear opportunity to enhance the performance of their athletes on the playing field.

12. How can coaches be encouraged to invest in preparing themselves to test out unfamiliar ways of viewing sport?

The value formulations and unfamiliar metaphors and language of some reform initiatives take many coaches out of their comfort zone. Coaching tends to attract individuals who have limited experience with complex value formulations and unconventional ways of looking at the world. Many reform initiatives call for a shift in the paradigm used to order their sports experiences. Many coaches would conclude that some of the changes recommended by parents are therefore impractical and not workable in their situations.

13. How can the life experiences of coaches be expanded so that they do not feel trapped in the coaching ranks because it is the only thing they know how to do?

Coaches often times have a limited range of skills beyond sports. They understand that their economic welfare could be at risk if they were to challenge the system and lose their coaching income.

14. How can coaches get the level of parent and administrative support they feel they would need to change their ways?

Everyone in a team community needs to send a clear message to coaches that it is not simply permissible to depart from their established approach to parents as they take the risks of changing their ways. Coaches need to be assured that if their win-loss record is negatively impacted by their efforts to achieve a broader range of objectives they will be recognized for their more expansive efforts, not punished for their failure to produce winning teams.

15. How can coaches justify their departure from conventional approaches to coach-parent relations with their coaching peers?

It is important for parents, athletes and the athletics director to understand that even when they support the coach's departure from established team management patterns, most coaches will still feel they are also accountable to their peer group, the other coaches with whom they identify. Efforts need to be made by team communities to accommodate this powerful source of influence, if sustainable change is to occur. Parents, athletes and athletic directors all need to work with the community of coaches with which adventuresome coaches identify to help them appreciate the pioneering efforts of their fellow coaches.

16. How can an entire sports league be mobilized so that the prospects will be enhanced that coaches will feel more comfortable involving parents?

It is highly advisable to mobilize an entire league in promoting positive parent participation in the life of their children's teams. When all coaches in a league are engaged in making a change in their approach to parents, it will be much easier for any one of them to take the perceived risks of collaborating with parents and athletes. By demonstrating to all coaches in a league safe and benign approaches to parent involvement it will be possible to influence the entire culture of coaching in that particular league. Even when all of the coaches in a league are awakened to the potential of positive parent involvement it will take several years of sustained effort before a critical mass of coaches truly become comfortable with new approaches to parents.

17. How can parents and coaches develop an appreciation that it takes time for coaches to recover from long-term distrust of parents and will require patience on everyone's part if change is to occur?

It takes time to recover from a decades-long perceived distrust of parents. Suspicion of parent motives has been a long-time feature of the coaching culture. The only way to modify these pervasive beliefs and attitudes is to bring parents and coaches together in safe and benign surrounding to begin to break down barriers to achieving positive parent participation.

8

How Coaches Can Support Parent Development

If coaches determine that it is important to create opportunity expanding team communities they will need to offer parents with the incentive and resources to learn the skills necessary to become contributing citizens who are prepared to perform their supportive roles. In this chapter I will identify the seven habits of a savvy sports parent and make suggestions as to how coaches can support the development of those skills that are essential for building successful Parent-Athlete-Coach Teams (PACTs)

1. Help Parents Manage Their Impulses

Coaches can help parents feel understood, trusted, considerate and introspective that will allow them to better manage their impulses.

Help parents feel understood

You can communicate to parents, with materials prepared by sports parenting experts or through discussions with the parent group, that the feelings of powerlessness that all parents experience when they witness their children compete are universal responses. You can indicate that you understand that these feeling can often lead to actions that parents have not thought through and that they sometimes regret. You can offer to provide the parent group with an experienced discussion leader who can work with them to develop strategies for managing these feelings.

Help parents feel trusted

When you ask parents to take on an assignment you can communicate clearly that you are confident that they will complete it expertly and finish it in a timely manner. You can establish checkpoints when you and the parents can touch base to discover

if there are things that you can do to help the parent complete the assignment. You can communicate that you trust them to take actions that are in the best interest of the team.

Help parents feel considerate

You can organize a discussion among the parents where their assignment is to identify ways they can demonstrate consideration for their children, the other athletes, the coaches, the other parents, the opponents and the game officials. You have the parents record their list of recommended actions and distribute it to the parent community. In addition, each time you witness an act of consideration by a parent you can make a special effort to recognize and reward it.

Help parents feel introspective

You can invite the parents to engage in either a formal or informal exercise to assess how their histories in sports may be influencing the ways they are responding in their child's sports communities. You can resist evaluating or interpreting their descriptions, knowing that it is enough for the parents to become aware of what may be going on as they respond to their children, the coaches and the other parents.

2. Help Parents Learn How to Support Their Children In Sports

Coaches can help parents feel accepted, respected, and responsible.

Help parents feel accepted

You can let the parents know that you are counting on them to join the team and become a part of everything you do throughout the season, recognizing there are many things that can stand in the way of them being able to take full advantage of the opportunities that will be provided. You can invite them to work with you to be available when their schedules permit to share in the life of the team community.

Help parents feel respected

You can communicate through your words and actions that you feel that the role of the parent in their child's life in sports is critical to the athlete's success and to the success of the team. You can listen carefully to what they tell you about their lives to signal to them that you respect the uniqueness of their situation.

Help parents feel responsible

You can proceed on the assumption that all parents will carry their weight in the team community consistent with their special circumstances and you can assign to the parent group essential tasks with the expectation that they will be able to perform these functions.

3. Help Parents Relax and Enjoy Themselves in Sports

Coaches can help parents feel welcome, informed, involved and reflective.

Help parents feel welcome

You can make the parents feel welcome at competitions by going into the stands prior to the game and greeting them and thanking them for coming.

Help parents feel informed

You can keep the parents informed about their children's progress by having periodic conferences with them and their children to assess the athlete's progress. Or, after having an evaluation session with your athletes you can send them home with a progress report and invite them to review it with their parents.

Help parents feel involved

In your pre-season meeting with parents you can invite them to share with you and with one another what makes them anxious in the bleachers and consider how their various responses to uneasiness might be impacting the athletes, coaches, and fellow

parents. Periodically you can have pre-game sessions with all team parents to discuss with them what you as a team will be attempting to focus upon during that competition.

Help parents feel reflective

In your pre-season meeting you can invite the parents to consider the various ways they can reduce their anxiety and modify their responses to their uneasy feelings. You can also invite the parents to develop a means of recording their collective behavior in the bleachers (using a video tape or an appointed recorder) and plan a session where the recording is made available to the parents, either as a group or as individuals. You can then invite the parents to consider the potential impact, positive and negative, of their typical patterns of behavior.

4. Help Parents Learn How to Empower Their Children Through Sports

Coaches can help parents feel empowering, competent and responsible for mentoring.

Help parents feel empowering

You can announce to the parents that this sports season they will be provided with many opportunities to use sports situations to teach their children important life lessons. You can offer them a time and place where they, as a parent group, can identify those situations that lend themselves to helping their children develop as mature individuals as well as athletes. Invite them to discuss how they can teach and equip without preaching and enforcing.

Help parents feel competent

You can provide parents with opportunities to support the team in a variety of ways and take great care to recognize and reward them when they have been of assistance.

Help parents feel responsible for mentoring

You can provide parents with a list of potential situations that

typically arise during the course of a season that can be used to help their children learn important life skills. You can arrange to have the parent leadership organize a discussion session where parents are challenged to identify techniques to help their children learn life skills, without preaching or provoking resistance and resentment.

5. Help Parents Learn How to Think About Sports in New Ways

Coaches can help parents feel intelligent, open, expansive and imaginative.

Help parents feel intelligent

You can indicate to parents that you are confident they will know the right thing to do when they are provided opportunities to anticipate the consequences of their actions.

Help parents feel open

You can conduct a pre-season meeting where you establish the expectation that you want them to get the most out of their sports experiences. You can invite them to look beyond the scoreboard for other sources of satisfaction, providing them with some examples of different ways of viewing what happens on the field, on the sidelines and in the bleachers. You can avoid the temptation to impose your views on them or to be defensive when they reject your views.

Help parents feel expansive

You can offer the parents new language to describe what is happening on the field, on the sidelines and in the bleachers and provide them with opportunities to use this new language in conversations with you and with the other parents as you periodically assess what is happening with the team.

Help parents feel imaginative

You can assign parents the task of coming up with some fresh ways of viewing sports that will expand their horizonx so that they can get more out of their investment in sports. You can encourage a

discussion of the ideas they have come up with and praise them for venturing away from conventional ways of thinking about sport.

6. Help Parents Learn to Be Good Citizens in the Team Community

Coaches can help parents feel empowered, invested and connected.

Help parents feel empowered

You can invite parents to participate in deliberations about the goals for the season and provide them with a structure to voice their concerns as the season progresses.

Help parents feel invested

You can assign to the parents the responsibility for establishing, promoting and enforcing the boundaries they establish for the parent's role on the team.

Help parents feel connected

You can establish team arrangements that allow the parents to get well acquainted with the athletes, coaches and the parents.

7. Help Parents Learn to Pursue their Vision of Good Sports

Coaches can help parents feel concerned, candid, committed and courageous.

Help parents feel concerned

You can invite parents to share with you and with one another the things they like most and like least about sports programs for children. You can list the positive and negative features of sports for children and solicit their ideas about how they can help amplify the good things and help reduce the bad things during the season.

Help parents feel candid

You can disclose some of the things you as a coach are tempted to

do that you do not consider in the best interest of the team and share with parents what you are doing to overcome those tendencies. Then you can invite them to share with you and one another the things they do that they feel are not in the best interest of their children and the team.

Help parents feel committed

You can discuss with parents the actions they feel they, as members of the team community, they ought to take in order to avoid those things that interfere with the achievement of the team's goals.

Help parents feel courageous

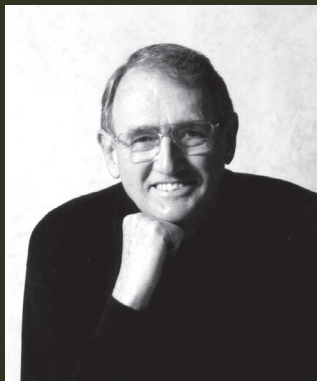
You can invite parents to develop a plan of action that will allow them to document their evaluations as one tool for initiating change in your organization (school or club). You can agree to advance their recommendations.

By taking the above actions coaches will have begun to establish relationships with parents that contribute significantly to the building of a mutually supportive team community. Everyone benefits from these initiatives by coaches, the parents, the athletes and the team as a whole. Many of the frustrating circumstances that coaches experience each season can be averted by following this formula for supporting parent development.

Strengthen Parent-Coach Relations

How to Appreciate the Challenges Coaches Face

If your children are to enjoy having an opportunity expanding sports experience, it is essential that you develop effective relationships with the coach. To achieve that end you will need to achieve a better understanding of the culture of coaching and of the challenges coaches face as they attempt to accommodate the demands placed on them by sports administrators, their peers, athletes and parents. This booklet offers parents a new lens through which to view the lives of their children's coaches.



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