



### Managing Conflict in Team Communities:

Recognizing that *Frustration Goes With the Territory*

*Sitting in the local Starbucks Meg and Charlotte were discussing their daughters' experiences on their sports team. What began as a casual assessment of how the coaches are handling the team escalated into an edgy and highly charged discussion as they opened up with one another. Meg, whose daughter is currently a starter, was concerned that the coach was not maximizing the team's chances of winning by using the current lineup of starters, while Charlotte was troubled over the fact that her daughter was spending too much time on the bench and that the coach was not providing her with opportunities to play a range of positions. She felt that the coach was already pigeonholing these 10 year-old athletes, failing to give them opportunities to experience a variety of positions on the field. As these two moms talked, the emotional tone of the conversation became more impassioned to the point that Charlotte asserted that she was going to withdraw her daughter from the team if things didn't get better. She acknowledged that she would be relieved to have her daughter quit so that her daughter could have more free time to pursue her other interests. However, she also indicated that she would really miss the regular contacts she has been having with the other team parents since this group of families had been together for over three years. This animated conversation occurred within earshot of their daughters.*

#### What's encouraging about this picture?

It is encouraging to see that Meg and Charlotte have so much enthusiasm for their daughter's lives in sports, for in today's opportunity-filled world it is important that young women are supported in efforts to excel in sports. And it is also heartening to see these mothers being vigilant to how their children are being impacted by their sports experiences. Furthermore, it is a positive sign to find parents who have used sports to create a mutually supportive extended family. Over three years these sports families have established a solid foundation upon which to build a sense of community that is unavailable to so many of today's families.

#### So what's wrong with this picture?

Let's review this scenario to discover what sports parenting challenges are revealed in this brief encounter. Also let's consider those actions that Savvy Sports Parents would take to manage their frustration so that the interests of their children and the team are well served. Also let's attend to those actions that Highly Effective Coaches would take to avoid the kinds of conflict their policies and practices have provoked.

#### PARENT CHALLENGES revealed in this conversation

**1. Challenge:** Meg and Charlotte may very well be placing too much emphasis upon their children's success in

sports as evidenced by the highly charged tone of their conversation.

**Actions:** *Savvy Sports Parents stand back, but be there for their children.*

**2. Challenge:** If Meg and Charlotte's children are dissatisfied with their sports experiences there is no evidence in this conversation that their mothers are inclined to view this situation as an opportunity to teach their children how to get "bosses" (authority figures) to become more responsive to their needs.

**Actions:** *Savvy Sports Parents take full advantage of opportunities to teach their children skills that will serve them in life on the playing field and beyond.*

**3. Challenge:** While it is natural for parents to share their opinions with one another about their children's sports experiences, they often compromise their position with the coach and damage team unity by criticizing their coaches' decisions.

**Actions:** *Savvy Sports Parents refrain from complaining about the coach in the presence of other parents. Of course, there are times when it is appropriate to mobilize parents to take action directed at the coach. However, except in extreme cases, it is best to refrain from complaining publicly about the coach.*

**4. Challenge:** By expressing dissatisfaction with the coach's decisions in the presence of their children Meg and Charlotte may very well be creating dissatisfaction and distrust in their children rather than demonstrating support for them. The intention of this "innocent" conversation clearly was not to create confusion for their children, however, it appears doubtful that it ever occurred to these mothers how their conversation might affect their children attitudes.

**Actions:** *Savvy Sports Parents urge their children to arrive at their own decisions about their coaches and encourage them to deal with coaches without their interference. Too often parents rob their children of opportunities to develop independence and maturity when they announce their dissatisfaction with the coach. It is not uncommon for athletes to conclude from their parent's rants that they will solve their problems for them.*

**5. Challenge:** Meg and Charlotte have spent the past three years sharing their lives in their children's team community. The very thought that the coaches' decisions could break up the parents' social network was troubling for both women. Their children's team community had provided the foundation for their social lives for several years. It was disturbing for them to accept the consequences of breaking up an important part of their social lives.

**Actions:** *Savvy Sports Parents prepare themselves for the realities of the uncertain future of relationships based upon shared lives in a team community. While it is desirable for families to remain in close contact when their children leave a team maintaining contact becomes a more difficult task when families are not together for practices and games. Team communities, by necessity may need to be short-term networks that are based upon shared interests.*

### **COACHING CHALLENGES revealed in this conversation**

**6. Challenge:** The coach has failed to involve parents in preseason discussions about what they and their children want to get out of their sports experiences.

**Actions:** *Highly Effective Coaches establish procedures that communicate to parents that they are expected to assume citizenship rights and responsibilities in the team community and to reach agreements about how to reconcile differences in their expectations for the team.*

**7. Challenge:** Meg and Charlotte appear to be arriving at conclusions about their children's reactions to their experiences with the coach without first seeking confirmation from their children.

**Actions:** *Highly Effective Coaches create a team climate where athletes and parents are provided opportunities to share their expectations with one another and with the coaches in the context of a safe preseason agreement-reaching session.*

It is natural for parents and coaches to have differences of opinion about how the team should be managed. These differences can create discomfort and frustration for everyone involved. It is unrealistic to expect each member of the team community to be dedicated to satisfying only the coach's agenda. We live in a society where we expect and respect differences and where we have established procedures for resolving conflicts. It is essential that sports communities accept that differences will occur and that frustration goes with the territory. Therefore, procedures for establishing a common ground, reaching agreements about how they are going to relate to one another and how they are going to reconcile differences need to be put into place. Otherwise athletes, coaches and parents are condemned to a life of conflict and frustration that will seriously compromise sport's ability to enrich the lives of athletes, coaches and parents, and to strengthen families and enliven schools, clubs and communities.

*David Canning Epperson, Ph.D.  
Editor*