

7 TIPS FOR COACHING UP THE PARENTS

By Brian Brunkow, Esq.

Coaching is a tough gig. But the payoff is great – we get a \$3K stipend and a free windbreaker. We're responsible for leading a wide range of parents from those demanding to win every game to the parents who simply and unfortunately don't care. We handle divorced parents at war with each other and negotiate with parents wanting their student-athlete to play every position... and oh occasionally we might see a parent or two who see their child as the starting QB and nothing less.

For coaches a good way to set a positive tone is in the preseason parent-coach meeting and regular parent-coach check-ins during the offseason. Here's a checklist of seven topics for coaches to discuss with parents (and guardians) during these meetings on effective sports parenting from my book, *Zero Offseason*.

I. Parents Support, Don't Coach

Parent-Athlete-Coach Communication: Parents must get on the same page with the spouse (or ex) concerning communications with the coach, expectations of the youth athlete, and the parenting plan and child support expenses for youth sports. This is the foundation.

Sports Parenting Role: Effective sports parenting is about providing unconditional support to the athlete. There's no need for the parent to become an expert in whatever sport the child plays. Let the coach do the coaching. There'll be a ton of bad days of practice or mistakes in the game and the athlete will look to the parents (hopefully) for support. Remind parents that "players play, coaches coach and parents support."

Don't "Wing it": Effective sports parenting is a skill that requires hard work. Parents should study and develop a game plan for how to build pre-game confidence and post-game coping and learning skills in the youth athlete.

II. Aligning Goals and Ego

Ask Questions: Encourage parents to ask their child why he or she wants to play sports. Parents should align their goals to the child's goals (not the other way around.)

Check the Ego: Parents need to suck it up - do whatever it takes to create a positive, aligned set of expectations with the spouse or ex for supporting the youth athlete. Check the ego. Too many parents equate "bleacher status" with the quality of their parenting. Do what is in the best interests of the youth athlete.

Who's Experience?: Remind parents that this is their child's sports journey. Parents shouldn't use this experience as a way to relive past glories or make up for lost time. Married with Children's Al Bundy scored four touchdowns in a single game! Yes, and?

III. Divorce & Sports Parenting

One anecdote I share with parents every season is Alec Baldwin vs. Kim Basinger. After a nine year marriage, Baldwin and Basinger waged war with an eight year custody battle, involving \$3M in court costs and legal fees, and 90 + court proceedings. Who benefits from that?

First Things First: Parents should have a parenting plan that supports the yearly sports schedule, including practices, games, and summer camps. It's tough love but it is toxic and unfair to the team and other sports parents to allow one set of parents to create a disruptive, negative environment. Address this issue early and head-on.

Child Support: Youth sports is considered an "extracurricular" activity by most state courts (check with your jurisdiction). What this means is that in many states you cannot force the ex to pay for certain sports activities in a child support plan. Sports parents need a game plan for approaching an uncooperative ex about sharing youth sports expenses.

Explain the life skills that youth sports provide for childhood development. Studies show that high school athletes have higher grades and graduation rates compared to non-athletes. And this is



especially important for the guys: male non-athletes are 10 times more likely to quit school compared to those playing sports.

Best Interests Standard: Some ex-spouses will act like a jerk regardless – routinely dropping their child off late to practice, etc. When this happens, show some flexibility to keep the athlete on the team in a structured, positive environment.

IV. Concussion Management

Training: Encourage parents to hold us coaches accountable. Parents should ask if the child's coaches are trained in concussion management – identifying symptoms and following "return to play" policies.

Education: Parents are absolutely responsible for learning about concussion management to protect their athlete. Provide parents with concussion resource material.

Align Goals: Parents must be aligned on what sports their child will play. Especially when it comes to contact sports like football. There are a lot of team sports to choose from. Parents should listen to the spouse's or ex's concerns about what sports they are comfortable allowing the child to play. And listen to child – don't "force" him (or her) to play a contact sport like youth football. It is not worth it. Football is not the place to "toughen up."

V. Comparisons

Patience: Allow the athlete to develop at his or her own pace. If they love to play, allow some breathing room and time to achieve their potential. Help parents encourage the athlete to stick with it rather than badgering them about what they can and cannot do.

Self-Charting: Only compare the youth athlete against where he or she was last game or last season. Some kids are just supremely gifted and it is unfair to compare the typical athlete against prodigies. Show the athlete tangible proof of improvement.

This isn't about coddling; it's about positive reinforcement and keeping kids invested so they receive the life lessons taught in team sports. The parents must be in lock-step with where they see the youth athlete's current stage and future expectations for improvement.

Proof of Concept: There's no better example of what's possible than Michael Jordan. Cut from his high school basketball team, he stayed with it to become the greatest athlete in history. Jordan was not the "chosen one" as a high school sophomore. He was cut. Use examples of what's possible through hard work, discipline, and grit.

VI. Pre and Post Game Routines

Pre-Game Preparation: This one is counter-intuitive. But parents should discuss the bad things that can happen regardless of effort. Help the athlete develop coping skills and reduce game day pressure by explaining that mistakes can happen, will happen, but mistakes are just part the process and are not the end of the world.

Post-Game Review: Remind parents to leave some breathing room before offering up ideas for improvement to the youth athlete. As coaches we've all seen the parent barking at their kid after the game before they even reach the car! Parents should ask questions about improving areas the athlete can control – effort, focus, teamwork, etc. Asking anyone to improve in areas they cannot control just leaves them frustrated and demoralized.

Parents' Support: The best pre and post-game role for sports parents is to provide support to the athlete. Be the safe haven for the youth athlete away from the field. Let the coach do the coaching while parents keep the athlete motivated to stick with it and improve on last game's performance.

VII. Process-Oriented Goals

Goal Setting: Avoid outcome-based goals. Parents should help athletes set process-oriented goals which allows the athlete to get "present." And getting present allows the athlete to then focus on the controllables.

Release the Outcome: There's a ton of factors outside of an athlete's control that impact outcome. Stay dialed-in on improving process and accepting outcomes. Learn a lesson, press delete, and move on.

Even Steve Jobs got Fired: In the 1980's Jobs personally brought in John Scully to take Apple to the next level. And the outcome? Scully had Jobs fired from his own company! Now that is arguably a bad outcome. Bad stuff happens regardless of talent, preparation and effort. Learn a lesson, press delete, move on... and come back stronger. Jobs did.

Brian Brunkow is a San Diego-based attorney and author. Brian's new book, Zero Offseason offers tips on divorce and effective sports parenting and was ranked at Amazon in the top 20 for book sales in the category of coaching football.

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