

Finding a Coach - What Every Parent Should Know

by Juliet Newcomer

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Finding a coach can be an overwhelming and intimidating experience, especially for parents who are new to the sport. These feelings are certainly understandable. A coach is, after all, a person who will spend hours training and interacting with your child - a person who will help shape their attitude about skating and competition in general for years to come.

Truth be told, hiring a coach can be a daunting task for even the most experienced of skating parents. The key to overcoming the fear associated with hiring the "right" coach for your child, however, is to approach it like you would any other major purchase or decision you would make, with research and patience.

Determine Your Needs and Wants

Before you can find a great coach for your child, you have to determine what makes your child tick. While a coach might have performed miracles with other skaters, your child might not respond to his or her coaching style. Think about the types of people who work well with your child and the ways in which he or she is best motivated. Does the child have any favorite teachers? And if so, why is that teacher a favorite? Are there certain adult family members with whom the child interacts particularly well? Does he or she feel more comfortable with older or younger adults, males or females?

Not all athletes respond the same to all types of coaches. Some need disciplinarians, while others might respond better to coaches who are very reserved. Determining your child's unique predispositions will go a long way toward choosing a coach who is a good fit. Once you have identified what type of coach would work best with your child, spend time watching a variety of coaches work with other students. Are the coaches positive and encouraging? Are they professional? Are they punctual and do they come to their lessons prepared?

Compare Options

Before long you will have developed a list of coaches who you feel are worth closer inspection. At this point you should begin setting up meetings. A meeting gives you a chance to ask important questions and provides an opportunity to find out how you, and your child, interact on a personal level with the prospective coach. Come prepared with some issues you would like to discuss. A few questions we recommend asking include:

- What is your coaching philosophy?
- How long have you been coaching? (Keep in mind, however, just because a coach is new that doesn't mean you shouldn't hire them. Still, you should at least be familiar with the coach's experience.)
- What are your greatest coaching accomplishments?
- What is your skating background? Do you specialize in coaching certain disciplines (singles, pairs, dance, synchronized skating)? What levels have you passed? Did you skate competitively?
- Are you a member of U.S. Figure Skating and the Professional Skaters Association (PSA)?
- Are you PSA rated or ranked?
- How do you stay current with the sport and the profession of coaching?
- What are your rates for lessons, competitions, cutting program music, etc.? How often do you bill for charges? When do you expect to be paid?
- What is your policy if we have to cancel a planned lesson?
- Are there any other policies that we should be aware of in advance?

Review and Research

Even if your child only skates a few days a week, your skater's coach will have a significant influence over his or her life. Therefore, it is important that you and your child are comfortable with the person you choose. Take as much time and talk to as many people as necessary until you are satisfied that you are making a good choice.

Subjects that are unfamiliar to you may arise during a meeting. The intricacies of the sport can be overwhelming, and it takes time to develop a complete grasp of every type of rating, competition, level, etc. If, during your meeting, unfamiliar subjects are raised, do some research after the meeting. For example, if you don't know the different figure skating levels or competitions, you can learn more on the "About Us" page at www.usfigureskating.org. PSA rankings and ratings can be researched on the PSA website at www.skatepsa.com. If you want to verify a prospective coach's claims, you can contact the U.S. Figure Skating and PSA offices.

Follow Up

OK, you have determined your child's needs, interviewed coaches and selected one you believe will take your child to the next level. You have verified all of their credentials and worked out a payment plan. But you're not finished.

The point of all of this preliminary work was to build up your knowledge base so you can make the best decision possible, much like you might do if buying a car or some other big-ticket item. Of course, you wouldn't spend weeks researching an automobile purchase, buy the car, then leave it sitting in your garage, never to be driven.

In a similar vein, after you have selected a coach, you should observe some of the lessons (take the coach out for a test spin, as it were). It is important to make sure that the coach/skater relationship you have invested in is what you want it to be.

If after observing a few sessions you have questions or concerns, set up a meeting with the coach. A respectful and open dialogue can prevent problems down the road. If you have a situation that you feel warrants attention, take it privately to the board of directors of the club or management of the rink and allow them to handle it appropriately. Never badmouth a coach to other parents or skaters. Most coaches are independent contractors and are dependent on their clients to earn a living.

Figure skating is a wonderful sport that can breed self-confidence, self-reliance, self-discipline, good health, lifelong friendships and a lot of fun. A skater's coach plays a large role in all of this, so take the time to find the coach that is right for your child.

Hiring a Private Coach

There are many reasons why your family might want to hire a private coach: to excel at a faster pace than in group lessons, to supplement your group lessons with an occasional private one, to get assistance on a difficult skill or to begin competing more seriously. Whatever the reason, you can use this article to help you select a private coach.

Ask the skating director of your local program for a list or brochure of local coaching staff for the rink and figure skating club. Select two or three potential coaches from this list and set up face-to-face meetings. A meeting gives you a chance to ask important questions and to find out how you and your child interact on a personal level with the prospective coach. Things to consider when selecting a coach are personality, learning and teaching styles, experience and technical know-how. A few questions we recommend asking include:

- How long have you been coaching?
- What are your greatest coaching accomplishments?
- What is your skating background? Do you specialize in coaching certain disciplines (singles, pairs, ice dancing, synchronized skating)? What levels have you passed? Did you skate competitively?
- Are you a member of U.S. Figure Skating and the Professional Skaters Association (PSA)?
- Are you PSA rated or ranked?
- How do you stay current with the sport and the profession of coaching?
- What are your rates for lessons, competitions, cutting program music, etc.? How often do you bill for charges? When do you expect to be paid?
- What is your policy if we have to cancel a planned lesson?
- Are there any other policies that we should be aware of in advance?

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What Makes A Good Coach?

A good coach...

- Knows the sport – *and* kids. He or she must understand the physical development of boys and girls – what children are and are not capable of doing.
- Knows about differences in personality – what is right for one child is not necessarily right for another.
- Understands each child's motivation for skating. Some kids are very serious about competing; others are there because a good friend is skating.
- Understands and can deal with differences in physical and emotional maturity, and appreciates each child for her or his individuality.
- Is sensitive to children from various social, economic and racial backgrounds. The coach must give attention and instruction to all the skaters and make them feel a sense of accomplishment. A good coach has more than just winning in sight. Long-term goals of helping young people develop physically, psychologically, and socially should take precedence over winning.

- Is skilled at teaching the fundamentals of skating. Skill development is the major reason kids participate in sports – most want to improve their abilities. Improvement is the primary source of enjoyment for athletes.
- Teaches young athletes to enjoy success and respond to failure with new determination.
- Emphasizes improvement, competence and striving for excellence.
- Teaches and models behavior that reflects desirable basic values.

Changing Coaches

by Kathy Casey

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In my opinion, lack of communication is a big issue. When communication breaks down between the coach, skater and parents things start to get tense. Weeks before a coaching change happens all parties generally feel that things are not right.

There are many reasons why skaters decide to move on, and in my 30 years of coaching I have heard them all. Here are some reasons I've heard: the parents think the coach is favoring other skaters; the past year produced mediocre results; the skater was solicited by another coach; the coach is not qualified to take the skater farther; the parents have unreasonable expectations for their child; there are personality conflicts; the coach does not like the skater anymore; or the skater just needs a change.

I urge parents to make sure that their reasons for changing coaches are in the skater's best interest. When the time has come to change coaches, I suggest you give it another 90 days to make sure your decision is right. During this time everyone involved should make every effort to improve things through open communication and positive change. If all fails, it is time to change. The coach should be the first person notified. Changing coaches is a personal matter and your actions and feelings should be kept private. Changes generally do not happen without hurt feelings. While that is not what anyone wants - that is indeed what happens.

If a coaching change must happen I advise a face-to-face meeting with all parties involved. It should last no longer than 15-20 minutes. Honesty and sincerity are important. The reasons for changing coaches should be discussed, but I do not advise bringing up heated issues from the past. At the time of the meeting all lesson and rink bills should be paid. Kindly thank the coach for everything that he or she has done for the skater, smile and wish them well. The meeting is over.

It is a good idea for the new coach to speak with the old coach before any lessons are given. It is imperative that the Professional Skaters Association Code of Ethics is strictly adhered to by all. (The code of ethics can be found at www.skatepsa.com.)

What are the worst ways to change coaches? There are many, and I have experienced a few of them. Here are a few methods I don't recommend: leave a message on the coach's answering machine; send an e-mail; say nothing and start taking lessons from another coach; go to the coach's home uninvited and be confrontational; send a nasty letter; have the new coach send the old coach a fax; or cause a scene at the rink.

You often find that once one skater at the rink changes coaches everyone thinks it is the thing to do. I urge parents to make decisions that are right for their own children and stay away from malicious gossip.

Coaching changes are one of the most unpleasant parts of our sport. It has happened or will happen to every coach who ever gives a lesson, whether he or she teaches Basic Skills skaters or Olympic champions. I have experienced unpleasant coaching changes a number of times, and my advice to everyone involved is to get over it. It is unhealthy to let bad experiences eat at you. Instead, look at the positive things our sport has to offer and enjoy the ride.

Sometimes skaters find a coaching change was a positive move for them, and other times they find it was a negative move. Make sure you are making intelligent decisions because the grass is not always greener on the other side.

Kathy Casey is a World and Olympic coach with more than 30 years experience. She has been a guest presenter for Team USA Camps for U.S. Figure Skating and is currently conducting skating seminars for clubs and rinks worldwide.

