



# THE SPORT PARENT

## Guiding the Way in the Field of Play

by Dr. John Heil

**FENCERS:** This article is for **YOU** and your **PARENTS**. Take a look, and consider passing it on.

**I**f it takes a village to raise a child, then it takes a team to raise an athlete. That is to say, there is much to do and there are many roles to play in raising a child, and in bringing an athlete along. This is the collective task of coach and parent, of sports officials and administrators and of the sport governing bodies—to create the environment where the athlete can strive and thrive. The mark of quality of this team's performance is the extent to which the goals for the child and the goals for the athlete run in parallel.

The heart of the team is, of course, the athletes themselves—those peers in sport who share the ups and downs of training and competition. Sport is a test of muscle, mind and heart. When the team works well, it creates a safe haven where children grow into adults through the trial and error of the game, while learning the value of trust and support. Wins and losses become

*lessons*, and the camaraderie and excitement of the game are remembered long after the score is forgotten. It is a task of daunting depth and complexity to create a field of play where athletes can flourish. It takes a group that will work together toward a common goal—that is, it takes a team.

The coach is the hub of it all, part of the team that plays the game and part of the team that creates the game. The coach—or more typically a series of coaches, usually across a variety of sports—is a constant, teaching and guiding the athlete's life in sport. The officials and referees are the guardians of the game, the rational forces who seek to keep the flow of emotions in bounds. They enforce fair play, ensure safety, and whistle the frequent reminder that, above all, youth sport is and needs to remain a game. Then there are those who labor in the background, whose work and dedication often goes unnoticed—the grassroots organizers, the staff and volunteers of your local parks and recreation departments, the state high school leagues, the national sports governing bodies, and so on.

Yet, the most essential player in the athlete's life always has been and always will be the parent. Clearly, no one has the potential for greater impact on the youth athlete. Most parents play this role quite well, struggling quietly but effectively, if not with some misgivings. Of course, there are abundant examples of sport parenting gone wrong—everyone has seen it happen. As a seventh-grade student, I watched in disbelief as the parent-coach of the opposing team told one of his players to “go kick my son [the pitcher] in the butt and tell him to get off the mound.” I felt embarrassed for my friend (who was, on this day, my opponent), and grateful in the knowledge that my father-coach would never say that to me. In spite of media attention given to the worst of these events, the same miscues happen again and again. Why?

It is clear that competitive sport brings a special challenge to parenting. Opportunities and dangers, joy and pain are there in abundance. When the child walks onto the playing field, the parents can only stand by and watch, helpless to protect them from its pitfalls and uncertainties. This is a diffi-

### HOW TO BE A CHAMPION PARENT TEN TIPS TO GET THERE

- Support your youth athlete by providing a safe, sensible opportunity to train and compete, and to grow from the experience of sports.
- Establish an ongoing dialogue with the coach so that you understand his or her philosophy, and remain aware of your child's strengths and weaknesses—athletically and psychologically.
- Provide unconditional emotional support as your youth athlete rides the ups and downs of the competitive experience, and help him or her learn the lessons of winning and losing.
- Avoid coaching—that is, avoid giving specific instructions or critique of the technical or tactical aspects of sport.
- Accept—even as you are bewildered by—your child's varying

demonstrations of composure and distress, maturity and neediness in the competitive environment.

- Talk candidly with your youth athlete about the role you should play as a parent at competitions. Be prepared to keep your distance.
- Work actively to manage your own anxieties and frustrations as you watch your child compete. Be sure to set these aside before you interact afterwards.
- Show composure in the face of stress, and let this serve as a model to your youth athlete. He or she is watching.
- Identify mutual expectations for your youth athlete's commitment to training and competition as you make successive commitments to support his or her sport activities financially and logistically.
- Guide your child in balancing sport, school, family, and other responsibilities.



cult task, given the emotional intensity of sport and the sense of responsibility that parents carry for the well-being of their children. But these young athletes are typically more resilient to the misfortunes of the game than to the missteps that come when coaches or parents lose perspective. When the excitement of the

competition is over children need to know they are valued just the same—win, lose or draw.

Some athletes will succeed regardless of their parents' behavior—good, bad or ugly. But there are many athletes whose path to success is paved by their parents' good efforts. Olle Larsson, coach of the highly suc-

cessful Rowmark Ski Academy, calls them "championship parents."

Working with your youth athlete is an ongoing task, full of its own victories and losses. You can lead the way with your own good example, and by revealing the worth of an inner compass to guide one's own way through doubt and uncertainty. While there is much you can do to open the door to success, the passage is theirs alone to make. But by providing an inner compass you can continue to guide their way in the fields of play.

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