

**THE SPORT PARENT:  
BUILDING THE FOUNDATION OF SUCCESS**

**Dr. John Heil**

If 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, 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. These are the members of sports team whose game is to create the environment where the athlete can strive and thrive. Let it be noted as an aside, that 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. So that wins and losses become lessons, while 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 force that seeks 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 grass roots organizers, the staff and volunteers of your local parks and recreation departments, the state high school leagues, the national sports governing bodies and on.

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 as great an impact on the youth athlete. Most 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 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. When the child walks onto the playing field, the parents gives them up for a time to the game – then stand by and watch, helpless to protect them from its pitfalls and uncertainties. This is a difficult task given the emotional intensity of sport and the strong sense of responsibility that the parents carry for the well-being of their children. But the 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 successful Rowmark Ski Academy, notes that more often than not, behind champion athletes are champion parents. Working with your youth athlete is, like parenting, an ongoing task. First and foremost, parents must equip the athletes with a moral compass to guide them in the fields of play. This begins with setting a good example, by using the same compass to guide one's own way. Some thoughts on the make up of the champion parent follow.

### **BEING A CHAMPION PARENT**

1. Support your youth athlete by providing a safe, sensible opportunity to train and compete, and grow from the experience of sport.
2. Establish an ongoing dialogue with the coach so that you understand his or her philosophy and remain aware of your youth athlete's strengths and weaknesses - athletically and psychologically.
3. 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.
4. Avoid coaching, that is, avoid giving specific instructions or critique of the technical or tactical aspects of sport.
5. Accept - even as you are bewildered by - your youth athlete's varying demonstrations of composure and distress, maturity and neediness in the competitive environment.

6. Talk candidly with your youth athlete about the role you should play as a parent at competitions. Be prepared to keep your distance.
7. Work actively to manage your own anxieties and frustrations as you watch your youth athlete compete. Be sure to set these aside before you interact afterwards.
8. Show composure in the face of stress, and let this serve as a model to your youth athlete. He or she is watching.
9. 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.
10. Guide your youth athlete in balancing sport, school, family and other responsibilities.

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SportParent;JHeil; 5/14 /2000;2/25/04;3/5/08