

Dear Coach,

I have always believed that the greatest tragedy that could happen in any sport is for a kid, with immense talent and ability, to go undiscovered. A kid that doesn't have much fun at his first attempts, gives up and quits.

I have some relatives and good friends that have young kids just starting out in sports. I have heard them talk of having the same problems my parents and I went through when I started 33 years ago.

I remember the problems very well. I remember the solutions my parents and I came up with. I remember how well they worked for us and how much more I enjoyed the game because of what they did for me.

You work with kids of exceptional parents. The kind of parents that want their kids to be the best they can be. Most of this story is from a kid's point of view. It's my point of view, back when I was a kid. It's been a long time but sports, kids and parents are still the same.

The secret to successful sports is very simple; The more fun you have in a sport, the better you get and the better you are at a sport, the more fun you have.

Maybe this can give some of your students' parents a better understanding of their kids' point of view of the game.

I hope this is helpful.

Sincerely,



SPORTS, KIDS AND PARENTS

This story was first published in the November 1999 issue of SOFTBALL MAGAZINE.

I started playing competitive sports when I was very young. One or both of my parents came to most of my games.

I learned the awful truth at the very start. My parents' voices, coming from the stands, had a major impact on my concentration on the game.

I had been raised, as I hope all kids are, to listen to everything my parents said. The same went for my coach. Anything that one of those three distinct voices of authority said, I listened. Even when their words were not directed at me, I listened. Even when I did not want to hear them, I heard them loud and clear. When a kid hears one of those three voices, he CANNOT ignore it.

When I was 9 years old and there were 10 people in the stands, I heard them. It broke my concentration. It took some of the fun out of the game for me. It would sometimes distract me so much that it ruined the whole game for me.

When I was 24 with 1,000 people lining each side of the field yelling, I still picked those 3 voices out from all of the other voices. It is impossible to tune those voices out.

Every parent wants their kid to be the best at everything they attempt. Parents want to be there to show their love and support for their kid, mine were no exception. Every kid wants to make his or her parents proud; I was no exception to that. That's the natural way of things and especially true when it comes to parents of kids on a sports team.

At 9 years old I found out that I was going to have a major problem with my parents. We had to sit down and have a serious talk about how much their voices were affecting my performance.

After we talked it out, we came to these conclusions;

1. There are 2 kinds of people at any sporting event, players and fans. Coaches, referees and/or umpires fall into the players' category.
2. A PLAYER is an active participant in the game. They either play a position in, coach or call the game.
3. A FAN is a non-participating observer. They neither play, coach nor call the game. Their only purpose is to cheer on their favorite team and players.

4. A PARENT is a FAN, unless they happen to be one of the coaches on the field.

5. Any attempt by a FAN to become a PLAYER is not acceptable.

I would step into the batter's box and my loving and supportive father would yell out something like, "Follow the ball all the way to the bat". I was all psyched up to bat. Now I'm looking at my dad wondering if he thinks I'm stupid because he has only yelled that to me fifty times before. It broke my concentration.

If the embarrassment had only stopped there, I struck out. On the way back to the dugout, of course, my dad had to try to console me. "You'll get em next time slugger". I wouldn't have been any more embarrassed if he would have stood up and shouted, "Oh my sweet baby. How terrible you must feel. Come on up here and let daddy give you a big hug and make it all better". If we were real lucky we would all strike out so only three of us would have to go through that public humiliation an inning.

What just happened? My dad, one of those three voices I could not ignore, just gave me coaching instructions. He changed from a fan to a player. He broke my concentration and just had an affect on my performance and possibly the outcome of the entire game. If this happens to your kid and their team loses, that is exactly what your kid will think too. It can take all of the fun out of the game for your kid.

Instead of being able to focus on being the best player and team member they can be, they have to stop and try to regain their composure and concentration. That is not what they signed up to do. They are there to play the game and have fun doing it. If they constantly have to worry about impressing their parents, it may be just enough pressure to suck every drop of fun out of the game.

All parents want to coach and advise their kids at their games; it should never happen while the kid is on the field. It will not be taken well at all. If it is something that absolutely must be said, say it when your kid is on the bench or in the dugout. It will be received a lot better there. Do it quietly and in a supportive tone of voice. Never yell it from the stands in a stern or angry voice.

When a kid reaches the point that their parents take the training wheels off their bike, one of the parents will still run along side with their arms out to catch them if they fall. Most parents try and do the same thing from the stands too. You must come to the realization that your kid is fielding a position on a competitive organized sports team, just like the adults and the professionals. That is a very adult kind of thing for a kid.

A parent must give their kid the chance to prove they can do it by themselves. It may never happen if they constantly have the feeling that their parents are right there ready to catch them if they fall.

It is almost impossible for a parent to not yell out these kinds of things during their kid's game. If the coach has done his job well, the kids know what they are supposed to do. They also know when they don't do it quite right. During the game, the last thing a kid wants to hear is one of their parents publicly pointing out what they did not do quite right. It just pours salt in their wound.

A good coach will go over the errors with them in the dugout or after the game. Every adult must choose their words and tone of voice very carefully during the game. During the game it is very easy for a kid to perceive an adult yelling something to them, as the adult yelling AT them. No adult should ever yell anything to a kid on the field that could humiliate a kid in front of their parents. That can be devastating to a kid.

Some parents still haven't figured this out; if you ever make the mistake of yelling out constructive criticism to another parents kid, don't be surprised if that other kid's parent starts yelling some constructive criticism right back at you, or worse.

Remember, your voice is not one of the three voices that other kid is tuned into anyway. Let that other kid's parent make his own mistakes. Rest assured that whatever you yelled at that other kid WAS heard by YOUR kid. If a mature adult can take those words strongly, how do you think an impressionable young kid is going to think and feel about them?

Supportive cheers in general, directed to the entire team, are always welcomed by players and fans alike. A comment to a player that has just done something good is also welcomed by all. While the kids are on the field, LEAVE THE COACHING TO THE COACH. It is the only coaching the kids want to hear while they are on the field.

Be the supportive FAN your kid needs and wants you to be. As long as they know you are there, they will play their hearts out to try and make you proud. However, if you remind them you are there too much, they wont be able to do that.

Always remember, your kid will tune into your voice because you have done your job as a parent very well. Now, do your job as your kids' biggest fan just as well. Do whatever it takes to keep their game just as fun for them as you can possibly make it.

At their next game, think about what you are about to yell from the stands. If it sounds like something your kid needs to hear, you probably shouldn't yell it. If it sounds like something your kid would want to hear, yell it so the whole world hears it.

If you, as a parent, do not make the game as fun as it can be, your kid WILL give up. Your kid WILL quit. Your kid WILL feel like a loser. If they don't have a lot of fun they will never reach the point where they love the game. If you don't allow your kid to reach the point that he loves the game, he will NEVER reach the point of being the best at the sport he can possibly be. Find every way to make the game as fun as it can be for your kid.

I have been playing for well over 30 years because, when I was a kid, my parents made and kept the game as fun for me as they could possibly make it. I came to love the game and then I became passionate about it.

My parents did that for me, so here is what I did for them. I kept playing, and now;

I am an ASA men's 'A' division fast pitch softball, 1st place, National Tournament trophy winner.

I was also voted the ASA Men's 'A' division fast pitch softball Most Valuable Pitcher of the national tournament.

I am very proud of that. I am even more proud to say that, before all of that, I was and I will always be, MY PARENT'S KID.