

"Coaching and Parents: Parenting and Coaches"

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NOTE: This article was submitted to *Volleyball USA* (Winter, 2000) anonymously to enlighten readers to the struggles that coaches face all over the country. Coaches leave the profession for a variety of reasons, but player and parent dissatisfaction and conflict are leading causes of coaching burnout. Youth sports and the actions of parents and coaches alike are under intense criticism. Identifying our goals in youth sports and emphasizing the positive outcomes is only possible if coaches and parents work together.

I decided to write this article when "they" finally got to me. I no longer coach high school girls' volleyball. I did not make that decision; it was made for me. In January of last year, I was informed that after a long career, I would no longer serve in the capacity of a coach. I was fired. In hopes that this article may stimulate a greater understanding between coaches and parents in the youth-sports world, here is my story.

I spent my adult life teaching, coaching and watching my two children flourish at this small private school. I had a great team, skilled players, and what I thought was, for the most part, a supportive parent group. My 10th grade daughter made varsity and was our starting setter. My worries about the daughter-mother combination handling the player-coach relationship were never realized. I was perfectly happy twelve months ago. I had the reputation of being a tough but fair coach - "be at practice, be on time, give me 100% during those 105 minutes, be supportive of your teammates, represent your school well, be proud of your contributions, and be proud of yourself" were my expectations. We had a successful season - a district championship, a winning record and the positive growth of our younger players under the leadership of our seniors. The foundation was in place and the future looked bright. The key players were returning, many of which played club volleyball. This is the kind of team a coach spends years building and grooming to win a state championship. Unfortunately, I would not be their coach.

Soon after our loss last autumn in the state tournament, I received a call from one of "them," a parent, who said he "wanted to be fair." He informed me that he and his friends were "going after me." To this day, I do not know the exact reason(s) for his actions or for my dismissal, but I do know the impact. A parent planted the seed of discontent that eventually negated a lifetime of effort and robbed me of my career and of my dreams.

The experience of being fired as "coach," along with other coaching experiences, inspired me to write this article. I hope it will enlighten people about the effects of their actions on their children as well as on those who coach them. Coaches who are professional, take their jobs seriously and work to bring out the best in each and every one of their players can be affected by misguided comments and actions of some parents. I am not an amateur coach who got into coaching by accident or by managing my child's little league team. I chose my career as women's sports came of age in the late 1970s. I played collegiate volleyball at a large Division I school and began my coaching career as I finished my education. I chose my career because it would allow me to follow the deep interest I developed in college. From biomechanics to sports administration to psychology, I

selected courses that would enhance my effectiveness as a coach. Through CAP and ACEP, I sought certification within my specialty in volleyball. I wanted the best **for** my players as well as the best **from** my players. I also wanted them to develop into fine, upstanding young women as well as talented volleyball players.

My interest and commitment to the sport led to my involvement in the development of Junior Volleyball in the early 1980s. I still am the director of a not-for-profit organization whose sole purpose is to expose girls ages 10 to 18 to the game of volleyball and provide them with high quality coaching and competitive playing opportunities. Today, I am not sure I even want to continue in that capacity either. Why? I am tired. I am tired of knowing that my best would not please 50% of the players and parents involved with youth sports. An incessant lack of loyalty and lack of dedication to the *team* aspect of sports has led to fighting between clubs and coaches for players and, sadly, emulates what we see daily in professional athletics.

What I witness daily in the gym, and in life, is that our involvement in team sports is no longer "for the good of the team." Instead, it is "what is in it for **me** and best for **me**?" What a shame! Team sports have the capacity to teach us so much, but do they anymore? Does our society even reward teamwork? Whatever happened to the notions that the whole of a "team" is so much more than the sum of its parts; that the pieces of the puzzle are what makes it come to form - not any one individual piece? Teams are like puzzles and both are incomplete without the smallest of pieces. Teamwork requires something from everyone, something that is not returned necessarily in kind or favor. Great teammates are difficult to develop today. Everyone wants to know, "What's in it for me?, Will I get to play?, Will I get a scholarship?, Will I start?, Will I play outside hitter?" The emphasis on "me" makes the essence of teamwork and team increasingly difficult to coach. Why is this?

Unfortunately, most of the disruption to teamwork, cohesiveness and player satisfaction starts at home. I believe many times this is an unintentional outcome of concerned parents supporting their child. How does this happen? It can start from the innocent and justifiable notion of parents wanting what is best for their child. However, those seemingly protective instincts can easily become selfish interests that do not permit the lending of oneself for the good of the whole. Many times players hear at home that they are "better than so-and-so" and should be "starting" or "setting," or should be the "go-to player." From the parent point of view, comments like these are intended to build the child's self esteem. Unfortunately, the result may be just the opposite - an increase in the player's dissatisfaction and the lowering of her view of her worth to her team. Comments such as these tend to undermine the player's identity as a valuable team member as well as undermine her coach and possibly her teammates. As a coach who has witnessed firsthand the effects of criticism on team dynamics, I would like to suggest the following:

Ten Guidelines for Being a Positive Player-Parent:

1. Cheer your daughter on, be supportive of her, console her, but do it without judging her, her coach, or her teammates.

2. Many things will aggravate you that do not even faze your daughter. Do not make something into an issue if it is not an issue.
3. Encourage your child to seek her own answers. Coaches respect players who come to them and privately question their playing time or role; it immediately indicates they want more.
4. Understand the rules of the game, and the coach's philosophy. Substituting in volleyball has consequences.
5. Do your physical part as a parent. Get your child to practice on time and pick her up promptly. Demonstrating responsibility and commitment can be incredibly effective.
6. Positions and talent sometimes do not match up. Coaches attempt to do what is best for the team, putting the best physical mix and the best "chemistry" on the floor. That may mean that sometimes your daughter may be playing out of position in an attempt to strengthen the "team." A positive spin by you can go a long way in helping her adjust to a new role. Stay positive, and maybe she will flourish.
7. If you have real concerns, and your daughter has unsuccessfully attempted to work things out with her coach on her own, schedule a meeting with the coach, and have your child attend with you (you may not be hearing the whole story - a common occurrence). If you are trying to resolve a problem, help your child by being a role model in the problem solving procedure.
8. Never approach a coach with complaints after a tough game. Wait, and schedule a visit after everyone cools off. Most coaches are highly competitive and, just like players, do not like to be confronted after tough games.
9. Please think before criticizing anyone connected with your daughter's club or team. Criticism is contagious and often hurtful. The damage you do could be irreversible.
10. Visibly show that you enjoy watching your daughter perform; this will make her feel better about her participation, no matter what her role is.

There are many great parents involved in youth sports and their presence and participation is needed as well as appreciated. Those parents who supported me in the past as well as in this year of crisis have helped me to move on. Just recently, I witnessed an act of positive player parenting at one of my daughter's games. A new player was not dressed because she forgot to inform the coach that she would miss the previous practice. After being informed of the coach's decision, this player called home - not to complain - but to inform her parents of the coach's decision so they would not have to drive to the out-of-town match. The parents came anyway, cheered for her team, indirectly supporting the coach's decision, exemplifying positive player-parents. Because the player and her parents did not make an issue of the situation, her team was able to focus on the task at hand and beat one of the top teams in the state.

Coaching was my profession and I have given it up for now. I will keep looking for the exceptions, but I am presently too tired to fight the ever-increasing selfishness I see in team sports. My dreams and aspirations as a coach may have been taken away from me, but there were others around me who also had similar dreams. I realize how important it

is for me to be a positive parent in my own daughter's success. As for my daughter, she has grown from this experience. Her role has changed since the start of the season from a back-line player, to a setter/hitter in a 6-2 offense, to setting a 5-1 offense, and she has adjusted well. As for me, I am trying to practice what I preach and follow the 10 guidelines to being a positive player-parent. I want my daughter to enjoy her high school playing experience, and I want to enjoy watching her. My daughter, her teammates, and her new coach deserve my support in the pursuit of their dreams.

In November, my former team won the State Championship, the first ever for the school. My daughter had a year to remember as did her teammates. I have some memories as a parent that I'm glad to have. I'll never know what it would have felt like to be on the floor with that group of girls - and I'd be lying if I said I didn't care or it didn't hurt. Sometimes doing absolutely nothing is what is best for the team. Thank you to: Dr. & Mrs. C., Mr. & Mrs. S., Mr. & Mrs. E, Dr. & Mrs. J., Mr. & Mrs. N., Dr. & Mrs. R, Mr. & Mrs. C, Mrs. W., Mrs. H., Ms. T, Ms. S, T.E. and P.K. Your support and comments meant the world to me. To the senior captains- your words will forever resonate in my memory. Congratulations - I couldn't be p