



Copyright 2008 Plain Dealer Publishing Co.  
Plain Dealer (Cleveland)

August 29, 2008 Friday

## **Trying to fit into 'P' coat; Student-athletes' parents walk a line of support, intrusion**

By Tim Warsinskey, Plain Dealer Reporter

For my first 21 years of covering high school sports, I came to understand an unspoken language with high school varsity coaches when they uttered one word:

"Parents."

It spoke gigabytes. I knew what the coach was thinking. We shared an identical image from years on the high school scene: wackos in the stands screaming at officials or stalking outside locker-room doors ready to confront the coach.

Then I became one.

A parent. The guy in the stands with a kid in uniform. It didn't happen overnight, of course. There were countless youth games played, thousands of miles driven and untold drive-thrus visited from the time my son, Ian, was 5 through his senior year at Mentor High. Hockey and baseball were his sports. He became a two-sport starter and earned four varsity letters before graduating in June.

He learned a lot, and of course, so did I.

Here are the 10 biggest lessons I learned from being a high school sports parent:

No. 1. Have no expectations, for your child or the coach. If you go into his or her freshman year thinking "This kid is going to be a star," you have just set the bar too high.

Trophies won from ages 5 to 15 do not mean a thing. What he or she did on the freshman and junior varsity teams is almost as unimportant. So many kids who are young all-stars will fade away. Even among the seemingly "sure bets" as sophomores, some will lose interest, quit, peak early, become ineligible or get kicked

off the team.

Conversely, for the little ones, puberty is like a magic bean. It takes them to unexpected places. I'm 5-7. My wife is 5-foot-nothing. My son grew to be 5-10 and a better athlete than either of us ever were combined. It was an astonishing transformation, and you will be amazed at the kids who weren't stars at early ages who stick with it and become valuable varsity performers.

No. 2. Give your kid space. Let her enjoy her successful moments and figure out how to deal with defeat, failure and disappointment. Don't get too wrapped up in the wins and losses. Your job is to make sure your child does not get too high after a win or too low after a loss.

No. 3. Try to have an objective view of your kid's ability and build on his or her strengths. Don't tear him down by telling him what he did wrong unless the child comes looking for constructive criticism. Most of the time, the kid knows it better than you.

No. 4. Let your child make decisions that matter, with one caveat. When he or she considers quitting - and most high school athletes have that moment - make the child understand quitting is not the first option, especially once the season has begun. Dealing with adversity and persevering are important lessons.

No. 5. Grades really are the most important thing. The chances that he or she will get a college sports scholarship are almost nil, and even if the stars align and that happens, the kid still has to have good grades.

No. 6. Don't ignore injuries or signs of extreme mental and physical fatigue. If he or she is hurting, find out what it is. Playing injured can hurt the team and your kid's long-term health.

No. 7. Let your child fight his or her own battles with the coach, especially with regard to the No. 1 complaint: playing time. Your kid has to learn how to deal with adults. It's part of growing up. He or she will have to confront professors and bosses, and this is a good place to learn. If it's another issue and you find it necessary to get involved, always wait a day to talk to the coach. Let your emotions subside and think clearly about the point you want to make. If you suspect there is hazing or abuse taking place, report it to the athletic director or principal immediately.

No. 8. Support the team and be a good fan. Volunteer, and don't wait to be asked. Attend booster club meetings. Get to know the other parents. Make your own positive experience in the stands, no matter what is going on below.

When you're at the game or event, cheer for everyone on your kid's team, not just your own. Don't be the jerk in the stands, the one yelling at the coach, your team, the other team, and mostly the officials. You are embarrassing your school, your kid and yourself. If you don't have anything good to say, sit down and shut up. If you're not enjoying yourself, stay home. You won't be missed.

No. 9. Understand these are competitive sports. It's not Little League where every kid gets to play. There's going to be disappointment, heartache, unfairness and injuries. Unless it ends in a state championship, it will end in defeat. Your kid is going to make mistakes. The coach will yell at him or her. That's what they do. Let it

happen. He or she is not a baby anymore.

No. 10. Enjoy the ride. It will go by fast. Hug your child when it's over.