



### *Parents: A Stitch in Time*

The "Helicopter Parent," as professionals refer to this new phenomenon, is quickly becoming the norm in our society, rather than the exception. We all know them, and sadly have seen them in action. The parents that hover over their child, fixing every conceivable problem that arises, ready to swoop in at a minute's notice and alleviate the suffering of their poor, helpless flock. This is the definition that is being given. Not necessarily my definition, but by professional standards, what many view as the problem of the next generation of children.

We read the stories, hear it on the news, and listen to horror stories from friends. Some of us have even witnessed the behavior firsthand. Parents who stomp in to school demanding that grades be fixed, yell at the neighbor kids for their child's perceived mistreatment, or call the coach to demand more playing time. The ones that fight with each other during football games, curse at teenage line judges for bad calls, even kill each other over a hockey game. When did this become acceptable behavior for parenting? What exactly is it that creates such havoc in a child's life that forces parents to become more like a lioness protecting her cub, rather than a cheering section for the team?

The more I am exposed to the top levels of volleyball, the more I am beginning to see this behavior infiltrate our sport as well. I began this story by taking a straw poll from coaches across the country, asking them some general questions, and asking for input on an anonymous basis. The answers came from high school, club, and college coaches. It should come as no surprise to anyone that the answers were very similar across the board. The coaches surveyed have come from small to large high school programs, high caliber club teams, and top DI level college programs. The collective coaching experience of this group was 107 years plus. Each coach surveyed brings with him or her a minimum of 10 years experience in volleyball. Some had experience in other sports, as well, so a comparison to other sports is a fair one.

There has been a noticeable difference in the behavior of parents from an average of ten years ago until the current date. The biggest difference most have seen is the attitude in parenting. It has gone from spectator to that of manager. Coaches perceive the behavior as a vicarious attachment through the child to one's own self, thus enabling the parent to become more vocal in his displeasure. Because the competition to get your daughter to a top level club or college program has become so heated, many are willing to do whatever it takes to get their child recognition that they may or may not deserve. The behaviors witnessed by many of the coaches seem to be non-biased according to sex. Although one coach did feel that dads are a little more vocal than moms, stating, "Moms quite traditionally are quiet by nature. You get some boisterous ones, but by and large not too much. Fathers USED to be very quiet, perhaps because of lack of knowledge of game, or lack of involvement. But I see more and more fathers at the tournaments, and they are becoming much more vocal."

The behavior that is being witnessed by these coaches runs the gamut, from the more assertive direct confrontation of the coaches, to the more subversive attacks on the coaches and other players through subliminal messages to the coach, other parents, and worst of all, to their own child. By

feeling the need to insulate a child from hurt feelings, and a damaged psyche, many parents are resorting to psychological arguments with coaches.

“If a girl isn’t getting 'equal' playing time as others on the team, the parent assumes that this is harmful to their daughter’s self-esteem. Some guise this as expressions of “what can we do to help our daughter see more playing time?” – translation “We want you to play our daughter more.”

At the older age levels, one coach said that this is the most popular form of confrontation. Many coaches feel that the louder, more obnoxious parent come from the younger age group, and for one reason or another, have resorted to more underhanded means.

The underlying message is not as insidious as many parents might think. Perhaps parents don’t even realize that their question may be construed in this manner. Sometimes the world that we now live in has caused people to try to be so politically correct in their manner of conversation that they avoid the direct approach in order to avoid offending anyone else.

What many coaches are suggesting is to not pose the question at all. “I have a meeting with parents at the start of the season. Rules are ... I don’t discuss playing time or player position with parents, period. I deal only with the player on these matters. I did have one parent who called because her daughter was unhappy with her playing position, and the daughter didn’t feel she got a satisfactory answer. I allowed the mother to vent. The next practice, when the player couldn’t let go of her anger, she was dismissed from the team.”

While this may seem harsh to some, dealing with these issues as a coach can be frustrating. Some coaches have even resorted to a sort of ‘screening’ if you will, of parents before the season even begins. “I have asked how previous parents were involved, and if there were problems, how did previous coaches deal with them, things of that nature,” was one response, and another stated that he had not taken a talented child for his team based purely on the parent’s behavior.

Rest assured, many of these coaches are not denying anyone entry into a program to be spiteful to a child, but to try to preserve the sanity they begin the season with. One coach said, “The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree. I usually try to root out that behavior right away, by getting my players to focus on me and not the parents, but it still happens. I have seen parents make their own kids cry by the way they talk to them after matches, and of course, when their kid isn’t playing, their own body language can be contagious to their kid.” While this may not be a mentality that is universal, 90 percent of the coaches I surveyed said that they at least did some asking about parents. Only 2 had denied a girl a spot on a team, while others did not actively screen, but only because they were high school coaches and their program did not allow for this.

For all the complaints about the parents that coaches have, one would have to wonder if it affected their coaching methods or styles. Many claim it does not, stating that they are coaching a team, not one individual child. “I don’t even look at the parents when I coach. They are not on my court, and shouldn’t matter. About the only time I notice the parent is when they attempt to coach their kid from the sideline and their kid is actually paying attention, and that situation I deal with right away (sometimes with a timeout).”

Some of the coaches see the problems with other teams, as well. “I had a team that was so bad, their players were smack talking my players before the match, and their parents were smack talking my parents! We have seen parents that will scream and/or swear at referees, line judges, opposing coaches, players, and everything in between.” And many parents will concur with this statement, as well. One coach had to deal with this problem from his own team. “When I was coaching 12s, I called a timeout to yell at my parents who were all yelling score, score, score at the 10-year-old doing flip.”

So, if coaches are not paying any attention to the parents, why all the fuss? The core of this argument comes down to the requests, demands, and threats given to coaches by parents. A club or high school coach is not making enough to recoup their costs and investments of time, trouble, and travel to begin with, much less trying to break even. So as you try to better yourself through classes, experience, and lessons, you are on the losing end of the stick. None of the coaches I talked with ever starts out in this business to get rich, or even to earn a living; some who are lucky and talented enough to reach the collegiate level have become all too happy to have left the club and high school ranks. The majority of the high school and club coaches have outside careers, and mentors kids to better the sport and to give all girls the experience of playing. But, if you are constantly bombarded with parents who are making unfair requests, sabotaging your every move, then where is your motivation? It can be very easy to lose sight of the goal when negative thoughts begin to pervade your thinking.

The costs of club sports and even some high school sports have risen dramatically over the years, and seems to be something that coaches feel many parents have come to believe that they have earned the 'right' to criticize, since they are paying top dollar for their participation. "Do your homework before club starts. Ask other parents about their experience with a particular club, and ask as many as possible. Ask about coaches, and find out about how big the roster size usually is. If there are typically 10-12 players on a roster, obviously not all kids are going to get equal playing time. Ask your child if playing on a 1's team and sitting half the time is going to be as good for her as playing on a 2's team and playing all the time."

Another coach said, "Be realistic about your daughter's abilities. If your daughter is 5'4" tall, she is probably not going to be an outside hitter for an 18's top team. Many parents can't believe that their daughter plays all the way around in high school, but not in club. If I have a kid that has played specifically a libero or defensive specialist position that can do it better than the high school player that played all the way around, you can bet the defensive specialist is probably going to get that spot."

The best advice for parents from one coach was, "Let your daughter be her own best advocate. If she truly feels she is not getting enough playing time, she needs to talk with me. I am capable of having an intelligent discussion with anyone that has a realistic argument. I don't want to hear from parents unless your child is on her death bed, meaning, I want the girl to call and tell me why she can't be at practice, or make a tournament because of a work obligation, or because she wants to better her chances of more playing time." All coaches agreed that if there are valid concerns that do not get addressed with the player meeting with the coach, then a parent should get involved, but only if the player expresses the interest to pursue the argument, and the player is in attendance, as well.

The common theme throughout most of the results is that many coaches do not feel that volleyball has become as harassing as some of the other sports that children participate in. For all the bad behavior by some, it is by far the exception and not the rule. But, make no mistake about it, the problem is there, and should be addressed. The thread linking all of these coaches together is their love of the game, and their desire to teach it to our youth.

Written by Judi Duggan

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