

Touchline dads are bad for boys and the game

By Jim White

Last Updated: 1:38AM GMT 29 Nov 2007



Child's play: demanding parents can lead to youngsters finding their kicks away from the football fields

The 10-year-old boy is one of the natural world's most competitive beasts. Put him in any environment at any time and he will turn it into a contest. Eating, drinking, staying up late, for him everything is ripe with potential competition. There is only one known creature more competitive than the 10-year-old boy: his father. Especially when he is watching his son play football.

A recent experiment using heart monitors discovered that the average man gets far more excited watching his lad in action than he does when following his favourite professional team. Red-faced and shouty, overwrought and overexcited, the touchline dad has become one of the comedy staples. In Nick Love's movie *The Football Factory*, just about the only laugh is when two of the protagonists come to blows as they watch their sons in a Saturday-morning game.

"Right," says the referee, picking up the ball as the two men wrestle in the centre circle, "if they're not going to behave like adults, we're off."

Actually, in my experience of youth football that is wishful thinking: it is much more likely both teams and the referee would have joined in the bundle.

Right now, however, in the midst of the inquiry into England's inability to qualify for Euro 2008, the touchline dad has become more than a joke. He is being cited as [of the reasons for our failure to develop good young players](#). His overbearing presence, it is claimed, is sucking the joy out of the game, producing a generation of leather-lunged hackers, unable to express themselves through skill, brought up to believe [most important thing in football is to "get stuck in"](#). And, indeed, in eight years managing my son's team I have witnessed some terrible things. The father who stepped on to the pitch, grabbed his under-performing son by the shirt front, lifted him off his feet and, spitting with rage, told him, nose-to-nose, that he would be getting it when he got home, was but one.

I have seen boys, buckling under parental pressure, run off the pitch in tears and hide. I have seen referees physically assaulted after matches involving eight-year-olds. I have heard mothers, when their sons are substituted, direct at the coach torrents of abuse so foul-mouthed they would embarrass Jonathan Ross.

Interestingly, as the boys in my team have got older, the incidents have diminished. Now they are 15, it is unusual to encounter such things. Sure there can be grumbles about dodgy line-calls, but it is rarely more than that. There is a simple reason for this: the boys whose dads raged when they were little have generally given up.

Why should they carry on with something that brought them nothing but grief and embarrassment? They have drifted away from the game and their dads have followed.

When my son was 12, in our part of town there were seven 11-a-side teams in his age group. Now he is nearly 16, there are only two. Which means more than 50 boys are no longer engaged in football. That is the irony of the aggressive touchline dad's contribution: as often as not he scares his child away from doing the very thing at which he is so desperate for them to succeed.

Yet the influence of such people at the top level, the place where it matters, is minimal. Go along to watch a game or training session at an enlightened youth academy such as Manchester United, Liverpool or Middlesbrough and it is like entering another world, a world less angst-ridden, less claustrophobic, less fraught. At United, parents sign a commitment to remain silent when they watch their children in action. Breach it and they are jeopardising their boy's chances of progressing.

The coaches, too, keep quiet. The result is the only voices that can be heard are from the kids, having the time of their lives as they play their small-sided games, their skills flourishing with every back-heel and lollipop. Nobody raises their voice, nobody rants, everybody just has fun. And this is at a club presided over by Sir Alex Ferguson, the world's most competitive manager.

Not that the parents are entirely sidelined. According to Brian McClair, who runs the United academy, no player can succeed in the modern game without parental support. It is crucial they are behind him, driving him to practice, encouraging him when he is injured. Look at the superstars of British sport: Lewis Hamilton, Amir Khan and David Beckham all have fathers who have dedicated their life to their son's career. Those dads did not need to shout at their boys. Theirs is an example we could all follow.

- You'll Win Nothing With Kids, Jim White's account of coaching his son's team, is published by Little, Brown at £12.99.