

**COACH / DAD WHILE CRUCIAL TO YOUTH SPORTS,
PARENT-COACHES OFTEN MUST WALK A FINE LINE BETWEEN
PLAYING FAVORITES AND PUNISHING UNFAIRLY**

In the nine years Walter Berry served on the Homewood youth baseball board of directors, he heard one complaint more than any other - favoritism by the coach toward one player. That player? The coach's kid. "It's almost the only complaint we ever got," Berry said. "Coach So-and-so starts his son at pitcher or shortstop every game. He's not a very good player, and we're losing games because the coach has visions of stardom for little Todd."

Mitchell McElroy, on the other hand, recalls getting no favored status on an Irondale soccer team coached by his father, Mark, several years ago. Just the opposite, in fact. "It was real important for him to avoid that at all costs," the younger McElroy said. "It became a running joke - that it was a whole lot better to be anyone but me on that particular team. The first person that he looked to when he was about to get on somebody was me."

"Berry and McElroy present two examples of the sometimes difficult dynamics that occur when parents coach their children in youth sports. That circumstance can be found on almost every team as youth baseball and softball around the Birmingham area begin this month. It isn't only those sports, though. In every sport, throughout the calendar, mothers and fathers volunteer as coaches. In doing so, they open themselves up to great joy and rewards and to great scrutiny and second-guessing. They must deal not only with the expectations of other parents, but with the challenge of maintaining good parent-child relationships of their own. Too often, according to some experts on youth sports, parent-coaches take all the fun out of the game and create friction rather than a bond with their child.

Necessary family time

Parent-coaches are the foundation of youth sports. "Eighty-five percent of people that coach are the parents of one of the kids on the team," said Fred Engh, president of the National Alliance for Youth Sports. "If you didn't have parents coaching their kids, you wouldn't have organized sports for kids in this country." "Would you want to work all day, then at 5 o'clock get off work and go out and coach a bunch of screaming, yelling kids and put up with all of it? No, you probably wouldn't. But you would and you will if your kid's out there."

Tim Billingsley of Columbiana is a youth softball coach whose teams have always included at least one of his daughters. "Sometimes parents get out with good intentions, to spend time with their kid," he said. "That's what it's all about - encouraging that family time." But parent-coaches have to remember they're responsible for other kids getting a rewarding experience, as well. "There's just that little fine line you have to walk," Billingsley said. Some walk that line better than others. For some coaches, the pride they feel in their child overcomes the judgment they should exhibit as the coach.

Daddyball

Obie Evans, the Dixie Softball national president who was a coach himself for many years in Birmingham, says he has seen too much "daddyball." That's when a parent tries to showcase his or her child by building the team around that child. The tendency also shows up frequently in the selection of all-star squads. He recalled his oldest daughter, whom he coached at the time, asking if she would make the all-star team. "I said, 'Denise, you've got to be pretty good to make the all-stars, and you're not at that level yet,'" Evans recalled. "Her statement to me was, 'Well, the other girls say because you're my dad, I'm going to make the all-stars.'"

While coaching his daughters, Evans said, he always felt the scrutiny of other parents. "It was mainly because other parents watch and see how you handle your child or punish your child or treat your child compared to their child," Evans said. The pressure he felt from other parents caused him to put more pressure on his younger daughter when he coached her, he said. "Some parents are great at it," Evans said, "and there are some that stink at it. I came close to not being a real good coach of my daughter because I over compensated, expecting too much out of her."

Fortunately, I didn't coach her but a couple of years, and I think I was smart enough to get out of it." Sometimes, parents who believe a coach unfairly favors his child can't admit that the coach's child is indeed a more gifted performer who can bring the thrill of success to the entire team.

Hugh Burton, former president of Gardendale Dizzy Dean Baseball, said that program tried to squelch complaints about "daddyball" by limiting teams to nine players, thus ensuring a regular role for all participants. Nonetheless, he said, the sons of coaches clearly were the superior players in many cases. "A lot of times the coaches' sons spent a lot of time training" outside team practices.

Parents can push too far

How far a parent-coach pushes his or her child to succeed athletically can produce a rewarding experience - or a divisive one. David Caven, executive director of the Texas-based Kids Sports Network, which trained 8,000 coaches in 2003, said a lot of parent-coaches push their children too hard because they want them to reach sports greatness. "To some degree you can understand that and there's certainly nothing wrong with parents pushing their kids in hopes of getting an athletic scholarship," Caven said. "But they need to be careful they don't push them too far. If you're really set on your kid getting a scholarship, then rather than having them spend three hours on the court or the field, have them spend three hours in the library."

For every 100 academic scholarships, there is one athletic scholarship," Caven said. Veterans of the youth sports scene are all too familiar with parent-coaches who push their children too hard. Schuyler Redpath, a Shades Valley High alumnus who's now a senior soccer player at Oakland City [Ind.] University, recalled one Shelby County coach who seemed to always yell at his son. "The father would just hound him, yelling at him, telling him how terrible he was. I could never understand why any parent would think that would help their child to play better."

Keeping coaches in line

David Perley, who coaches his son Matthew on a baseball team in Vestavia Hills, cited a father coach who had been a good player in his day. Nothing his son does measures up. The boy is 8. Perley recalled a cleanly fielded ground ball that the boy threw for an out. "Because there was no stutter step and the throw was high, there's still criticism. It's not, 'Way to pick up the ground ball and get him out. That's my boy.' It's, 'How many times have I told you? You've got to throw it right on the numbers. The first baseman had to reach for it, for God's sake.' You can see his little 8-year-old heart just break. He usually ends up in tears after the game."

Even worse examples exist. When Louis Aldridge coached baseball in Pinson, he saw a coach hit his own son. The coach kicked the boy so hard he raised him about six inches off the ground, Aldridge said. The man had to attend anger management classes. And Aldridge made sure his son never played for that coach.

Billingsley, the Columbiana youth softball coach, said he and co-coach Ashley Phillips came up with a way to make sure that neither pushed his daughter too hard. Billingsley worked with Phillips' daughter and Phillips worked with Billingsley's. "You tend to be a little tougher on your own kid, and it may be easier for someone else to make that correction and not have all that emotion behind it," Billingsley said.

Billingsley said spouses can help keep parent-coaches in line. "I catch it from my wife and Ashley would catch it from his wife if they thought we were being too tough or had unreasonable expectations, or in their opinion were being just too rough on them," he said.

Creating bonds

While sports can drive a wedge between parent and child, they can also create wonderful moments and a strong lifelong bond. "This gives me a chance to share something with my son that I think is important, which is athletics," said Tony Ensor, who is general manager of the Birmingham Barons and helps coach his son Gehrig on the 8-year-old Shades Mountain Yankees. "It teaches them a lot of lessons. I want to be around to be able to help in that development.

"Eddie Passmore echoes that sentiment as he talks about coaching his 11-year-old daughter, Courtney, and her 11- and 12-year-old Bumblebees softball team at McAdory. Coaching her gives them something else in common, he said. "Especially for girls. They don't deer-hunt or anything like that." Engh, who wrote the book "Why Johnny Hates Sports," said the bottom line is that parent-coaches need to take a step back and consider their true purpose. "What is this all about? Are we, as parents, worried about making all-stars or are we there trying to help these kids socially grow, emotionally grow, physically grow - all the positive benefits?" he said.

Caven reminds parents that sports are one leg of their children's journey through life. "At some point kids are going to quit playing sports but their life continues," he said. "The opportunity we have to teach them respect, dignity, teamwork and work ethic and how to get along with others, responsibility and character - those are the things they can take with them long after they hang up their glove or their cleats." Rules for the parent-coach Do's and don'ts for parents who coach their own children in youth sports: Do ensure they understand that as the coach you must treat them the same as every other player during practices and games. Hold them accountable to the same rules that the rest of the team must follow. Call them by the same name everyone else does. Encourage them the same way you do others. Allow them to play the amount of time they deserve. Remember, your children play sports for the same reasons others do - to have fun. Emphasize good effort and acknowledge it appropriately. Set a good example - be a good role model. Don't: Be more strict with them than others. Allow them to break rules or miss practices and not be punished. Call them by your nickname for them ["Son," "Sweetie" and so forth].

Set higher or lower standards for your child. Play your children the entire game just because you are their parent. Ridicule or criticize poor performance. Measure their value as team members by the win/loss record.

Source: Dave Caven, executive director of the Texas-based Kids Sports Network,

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