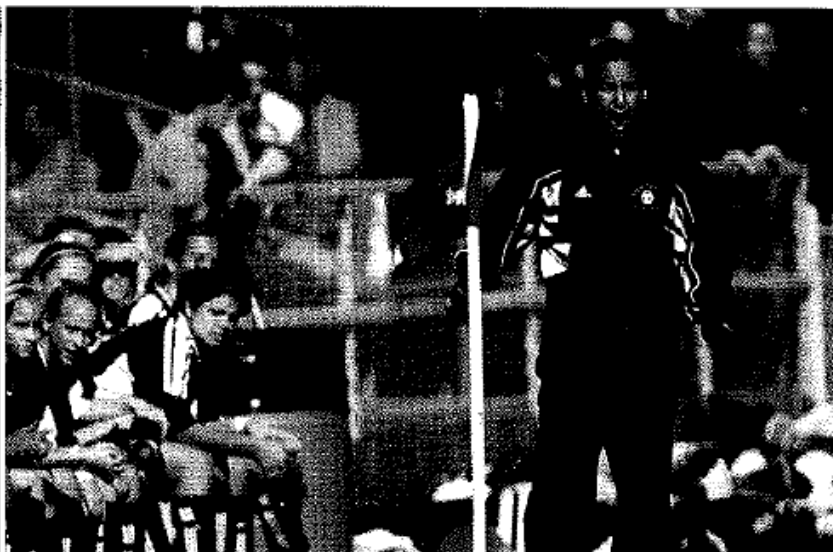


COACHES:

Is it Time to
Distance Yourself
and the Program
from the Parents?



By Brian E. Preece

During my coaching career, I've had many, many great experiences with parents of my athletes. These wonderful experiences are too numerous to count. However, times are changing, and parents are getting more and more aggressive in their roles with our athletic programs.

They are more demanding of our coaches on several fronts. While parents may be well-meaning, they usually see their son's and daughter's happiness as being more important than other team or program goals. This is natural; however, it is something that has to be checked at some level.

The coaches of high-profile team sports, such as football, basketball and baseball, often have to walk a fine line between winning games, helping their athletes reach their goals, and keeping the parents happy. Also, in the high-profile sports, any program might have scores of parents who know quite a bit about the game or had successful individual and team experiences. These parents, as the cliché often goes, "know enough to be dangerous."

As a wrestling coach, I had less of these pressures, and the parents and athletes tended to trust my coaching unconditionally. But the football coach won't have this luxury because most of parents are "experts" in football and will let the coach, principal or even superintendent and school board "in on their knowledge and how the coaches are messing up." As a wrestling coach, "playing time" wasn't much of a concern as I could always point to the weekly "wrestle-off" to justify who was wrestling varsity that night, but the team sport coach has to justify these decisions all the time, and these decisions are layered in subjectivity.

The three things parents seem to want most consists of: 1) playing time for their children (sometimes at all costs), 2) college scholarship offers and 3) a winning program. Obviously, all three of these elements are somewhat linked. In the team sports, parents want playing time for their sons and daughters above anything else, including wins for the team.

Parents also want their sons and daughters to have coaches of high moral character who will help to influence their children to achieve in school and life. They also typically want coaches who are patient and kind and positive – well most do – but some parents will trade all that for playing time from their son's coach or a few wins for their daughter's team.

There are many points of view on coach-parent relations, ranging from parents are best seen but never heard, to where coaches welcome parents at the highest levels, making them team moms, managers and even assistant coaches in the programs. However, as I see the new demands parents are placing on their high school athletic coaches and programs, my paradigm has shifted toward the former position thinking, at least in team sports (especially the high-profile teams sports where the high school coach can often be fired for simply not winning enough games).

Coaches need to distance themselves a great deal more than what is going on in most programs today. Some coaches are their own worst enemies as they invite well-meaning parents to have important roles in the program only to have these parents turn on them if their son is benched, or doesn't get the scholarship offer or the team loses too many games for their liking.

Coaches tend to lean more and more on parents because of monetary matters. Funding for athletic programs is sparse or in some schools and districts non-existent. For example, a high school baseball team in our district is budgeted just under \$2,000 – not enough to buy balls to last the season let alone bats, helmets, batting nets, tees, uniforms, etc. So parents sometimes step in to fill in these monetary gaps. Since programs often involve parents in these fund-raising processes, the parents feel more entitled to make demands on the coach, program and/or school. Coaches feel pressure to play athletes of parents who either donated a lot of money or helped greatly in these efforts. Coaches don't want to admit this, but I invite all coaches to analyze some of the players they are playing or keeping on the team versus the ones who

are on the bench or were cut. It is easy to spot "this problem" in our colleagues' or rivals' programs, but perhaps all of us in the profession should take a closer look in the mirror. That is the first step toward a solution.

The second step is to calculate how much money is needed to run the program. Do you really need a new set of uniforms every single year? Do you really need to take that out-of-state trip? Plenty of programs win and win a lot with older uniforms and equipment (it can be old but should be safe) and playing their games close to home. Taking your team to Florida, Hawaii or Las Vegas might seem a lot of fun, even somewhat necessary, but when you have to rely on financial backing from parents, you should realize that there are potential repercussions to this.

A very successful volleyball coach told me that coaches should really analyze what they need. First, if coaches raise funds without involving parents at all, or very minimally, this is the way to go. She also recommended that trips and "spirit pack" costs should be defrayed equally among the players rather than relying on large donations from a few select parents to cover these costs.

This coach also advised to say "No" to parental donations. Coaching at a high school where most of her athletes were affluent, parents were willing to make donations but usually at a "cost" or "expectation." In her first year, an excited and wealthy parent of a freshman member of her team offered her \$10,000, which would typically take care of any high school volleyball team's basic needs – and then some. It would certainly be hard for any coach to turn this money down. However, she told the parent that she would accept the donation, but only after her daughter had gone completely through the program. She said, "hold on to your money, and if you like what our program has done for your daughter, I will gladly accept your donation, but not until then."

This coach emphasized that coaches should really analyze what the program really needs to win, make sure this cost is spread to all the athletes as equally as possible, and if fund-raising needs to be done, perhaps most or all of the labor should come from the coach and his or her staff.

Following on this advice, a typical baseball coach can get businesses to donate money for signs on the outfield fence. In reality, no parents are needed to do this. Perhaps parents can have a limited role by donating or finding a donor perhaps to raise enough money to buy a spirit pack (sometimes called a "player pack" of basic equipment or workout gear). Again, it is easy to take the money from parents or some big cash donation from a prominent booster, but remember there

is a potential price for this – including your own job security.

Another football coach raised money by having his players sell discount cards throughout the community. The catch was that the coach and his staff got the businesses to donate these deals to the program and the players sold them. There was little or no direct parental involvement, and the fund-raiser still raised substantial money for the program. The bottom line is that coaches, and I know no coach likes fund-raising, should change the focus of their fund-raising to be more coach-oriented and maybe player-oriented, and less parent-oriented. Cutting the purse strings reduces the entitlement parents feel with the program or a particular coach, which helps coaches to distance themselves from parents.

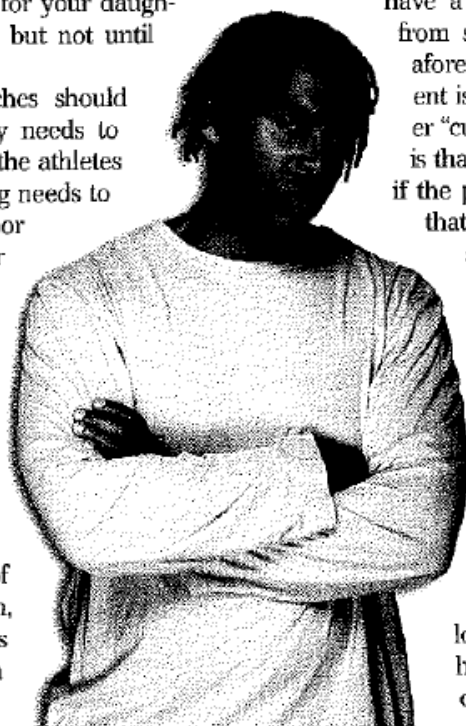
Further, it is recommended that coaches not have parents serve as assistant coaches, including summer programs. If a coach looks long and hard enough, qualified and eager help is available. Sometimes, there could be exceptions to this.

If a parent is added to your staff, that parent should be willing to start before his or her son or daughter is in your program, stay long after the child has left and perhaps be willing to coach a level of the program different than where the child is playing. Then perhaps that's the type of parent who might be the exception to this general rule. And, obviously, loyalty to the program and knowledge of the sport, along with the ability to relate with young people (not just their own), is crucial. But many high school programs pad their coaching staffs with moms and dads and pay the consequences.

Many coaches put athletes on their teams because of parental help, financial or otherwise. It is sometimes viewed as even necessary by the coach for immediate job security or just to fund that exciting out-of-state trip. But if you have a problem parent, would that prevent you from selecting that athlete for your team? The aforementioned volleyball coach said if the parent is bad enough, coaches should really consider "cutting" that athlete. The bottom line she said is that the program or team comes first. She said if the parent has a history of being undermining, that parent is potentially poisoning the well-spring of your entire program.

Even kept at the most distant level, parents are still a part of the program. Certainly, they will put their needs of the children first and foremost. But if this reaches a certain level that is poisonous or too problematic, it might be best not to have this athlete in the program.

This coach also said that there are certain do's and don't's for parents, and parents and athletes are expected to follow them. There is an explicit demand from her athletes to help keep their parents "in check" in how they deal with her as a coach,





other players in the program and other parents in the program. There is a certain chain of command for communication, and these things are specifically outlined in a parent meeting before the season starts.

Following are some suggestions I've gleaned from other coaches, as well as my own experiences, on how to keep parents in check:

1. Analyze your program's true financial needs and minimize parental input and control of fund-raising ventures.
2. Defray costs as much as possible equally among the players (and their parents) instead of relying on one or very few parents to raise money.
3. The primary reason for keeping an athlete should never be financial considerations or what help that parent brings to the program or as some favor to some parent that has helped the program in some way in the past.
4. Coaches should have parent meetings to lay out all expectations of coaches, players, administrators and parents in the program.
5. Parents should expect their son or daughter to talk with their coach first about issues such as playing time rather than having the parent talk with the coach first.
6. Parents should never be allowed to approach the coach after a loss to talk about the game or playing time. Emotions are often high at these times and these conversations are not appropriate. Parents who feel the need to talk with coaches about these types of issues should make an appointment with the coach at least 24 hours in advance.

7. The proper chain of command for most problems is as follows: the parent should expect to have his or her son or daughter talk with the coach first to resolve problem, then the parent should talk with the coach, and then next the athletic director, then the principal, etc. Most problems can be resolved at the lowest levels in the chain of command and this is where problems should be attempted to be resolved first.
8. Parents should realize that ability alone does not guarantee a spot on the team or playing time. The coach has to look out for the team or program first, not just your son or daughter. Team chemistry and playing within the program's philosophy are just as important (and really more so) as ability. Playing on a high school athletic team should be viewed as a privilege, not a right.
9. Parents and players should really try their best to edify the coach and the coach should do the same for his or her athletes and parents. Athletes should be encouraged not to talk negatively about their teammates, coaches and team in front of parents and other family members and friends.
10. Where possible, parental roles in one's program should be minimized. Head coaches should avoid using parents as assistant coaches. If this can't be avoided entirely, the situation should be monitored closely. It takes a special breed of parent to remain objective when coaching his or her son or daughter.
11. Parents should keep in mind the most important thing they should expect in their son's or daughter's coach is a person of high moral character, a person who is fair and consistent, a person who acts in the best interests of their son or daughter within the context of the team or program. Parents and others who dismiss these things because wins are lacking, or that will trade these things in for a few more wins or playing time for their son or daughter deserve what they ultimately receive. Coaches should focus on these important "fundamentals" of coaching and not "sell their coaching soul" for a few more wins. **□**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Brian Preece was the head wrestling coach at Provo (Utah) High School from 1994 to 2006. At Provo, he coached eight state champions and more than 50 state-placers, and his teams placed in the top 10 eight times. He was also named as the top Utah coach by the National Wrestling Coaches Association for the 2005-06 season.

