

Undermining a Coach: Parental Interference

**By: Dr. Lance Brown
Chairman of the Sports Sciences Department
Of Tulane University
And L.S.A State Staff Coach**

Imagine the following scenario: as a player rides home from a game with his parents, the father begins his critique of the game.

“Your Coach is making a big mistake the way he is handling you,” the father says. “Everyone knows you’re better than Ralph, and you should be one of the starting forwards. What is he thinking?”

What ramifications does this behavior have for the player? For the Coach?

Initially, we must look at the role parents have in the soccer experience. Ideally, parents serve as the primary support system for their child’s involvement. This means that they look at the experience from the child’s point of view and offer positive reinforcement for their child’s efforts, no matter what!

It is important to note that the above scenario is often the result of this exact perspective. The parent is attempting to boost their child’s self-confidence, as a player. Unfortunately, the method of accomplishing this worthy task is inappropriate. It violates a cardinal rule in developing self-concept – i.e. it attempts to build the child’s concept of self by putting others down. This serves as a shaky foundation on which to build esteem. It refers to external factors, i.e. the dumb Coach, as a source of self-concept rather than focusing attention on the true source of self esteem, i.e. the internal feelings and perceptions of the child concerning his own skill level, place on the team or in the world at large.

Of primary concern is the resulting effect of this approach on the child. Undermining the Coach in this manner forces the child to choose between two of the most influential adults in his life and creates confusion. Concentration becomes divided during the game with the athlete never really committing to his “task at hand.” He becomes literally frozen in his tracks and is unable to focus on his duties. Individually, the child is torn between the love of his parents, and the respect he has for his Coach. Each is integral parts of the development of his self-concept of ability on the field and as a human being.

In essence, The Coach’s position as “lead decision maker” for the team has been placed in question. In many cases, he remains unaware that this problem even exists because the parent chooses to maintain a dialog with his son, and not with the Coach. So, how should this be handled? What should a parent do when he or she feels that their child is being treated unfairly?

The parent should handle this scenario on two steps. The first step is to refrain undermining the Coach with his child. Instead the parent should pursue the dialog based on the effort his son is putting forth in the role that has been given. The parent should be able to identify specific tasks that his son is doing well, and pay compliments to them. These could include passing skills, aggressive play, communications on the field,

punctuality, etc. By offering positive reinforcement to the task related behaviors, the athlete's self-concept of ability is enhanced.

Secondly, the parent has every right to speak with the Coach about the role his son has on the team. This conversation should take place away from the field, after practice when no one is around, or even on the phone if necessary. The approach should be one of "information seeking" rather than confrontation. For example, the parent could begin the conversation with questions like, "I'm interested in my son's role on the team. What do you see as the reasons for his role as a non-starter? What does he need to improve in order to move into a starting role?"

The Coach should be able to identify specific skills, which are in need of improvement as well as a description of what others are doing who have earned their starting position. The parent should also be able to describe his reasoning for questioning the Coach. This reasoning should not be centered on the fact that "everyone knows....." or on past performances at younger levels. It should be versed in equally compelling evidence of superior play.

In the final analysis, at least four possible outcomes exist:

1. The Coach agrees to start the player.
2. The Coach agrees to look for progress and give the player every chance to work his way into the starting lineup.
3. The parent agrees to disagree with the Coach yet maintain a positive approach with his son.
4. The parent opts to change teams.
- 5.

It is critical that the "athletic triangle", composed of Coach, parent and athlete, functions in an atmosphere of open communication. It is easily critical that the child's welfare is put above all else. This includes adult inadequacies in communication, problems at home that are carried onto the playing field, parental egos, coaching incompetence and inferior skill level on the part of the athlete.

The game is for the kids! Adults are there to organize, supervise, teach and offer support for the efforts displayed on the field. In some cases parents are left with the task of being supportive of their child in spite of disagreements with the Coaches.