

From the State Office...

Daddy Came to My Game and Now He's in Prison

By Dan Freigang, Sport Psychologist with the U.S. National Team

Yes, the title is inflammatory but I need to get your attention concerning the rise of poor parental behavior and violence beginning to impact American soccer. We have all heard the case of Thomas Junta, a parent who killed an ice hockey coach during a summer shinny session. This should have been a wake up call for all parents with children in youth sport, but instead minor hockey was rocked again with another parent brawl two weeks after Junta's manslaughter conviction. The insulting part of this latter hockey melee was the coach trying to justify this action as acceptable. Well, "you can lead a horse to water but you can't make him drink", goes the saying. For some reason this hockey coach and others who like him, do not understand what is at stake. Parents, coaches, players and the game are disgraced with this of philosophy. Perhaps we can be a bit more proactive in the soccer world.

What is happening on the fields?

You might think I'm overreacting, but the issue of violence in sport is enormous. Let me give you a brief synopsis of some of the more recent incidents that have crossed my desk: 1) a parent from an opposing soccer team comes out of the stands, punches a 10 year old player in the face because the young player apparently was "too rough", 2) a minister stabs a referee at youth game during halftime, 3) a middle-aged man physically attacks a fourteen year old girl during a game. The litany of infractions persists and this doesn't even include the daily stream of ignorant comments that flow from the stands to players, coaches and referees. The destruction is serious and costs our children the positive experiences of sport.

More than one third of our youth are involved in some form of sport. That accounts for more than 30 million children. Every year children leave sport in equally staggering numbers. Why such a high drop out rate? One-third of all participants drop out because of: the following factors: 1) constant criticism, disapproval, 2) over competitive emphasis from adults, 3) little playing time, 4) poor communication by the coach, 5) coaches who create an environment of fear, and 6) inappropriate full game structure.

A picture is worth a thousand words.

The destructive effects of parents behaving badly is suffered most by their own children. Why? Because children learn by watching. If they witness screaming, hitting and cursing the probability of a child acting in that fashion increases. This finding, provided by the prominent psychologist Albert Bandura from Stanford University supports the notion that people will learn and be shaped by the environment around them. It is called social learning. Social learning provided us with the framework that exposed poor quality television and poor role models as destructive to our children. If our kids are watching tacky talk shows with sensationalistic topics, view poor athletic role models and watch destructive images in movies, those are all negatively influences that impact upon our kids. Yes, there is a small number of some public service spots that promote dignified behavior and these are helpful. However, if you measure out how much poor quality exposure is produced, you recognize that kids are bombarded with conflicting role expectations everyday. Children are expected to be courageous, truthful and helpful. There is a mixed message when during play their attention is drawn to Billy Bob in the stands shouting at his child with incomprehensible coaching one minute and berating a referee the next. Apparently Billy Bob, having never learned sport, has somehow gleaned that the soccer coach and referee do not know soccer. Do you think this might be a source of conflict for a child?

Many sociological experts recognize a moral decay in our society as a whole. These changes appear in our culture at every level. Thomas Tutko, a sport psychologist from San Jose state comments upon this phenomenon. "This shows the degree to which we have gotten out of control, many parents have lost sight of the purpose of sports, they are asking if my kid is going to win and get a scholarship".

What about role models for adults? Adults are at risk as well. We often apply entertainment roles from professional

sports upon youth games. Its completely inappropriate because the youth game is based upon development and enjoyment. The professional game is based upon media, sensationalism and commerce. Have you seen the advertisement on television that promotes an upscale SUV with father shuttling between swim meet and soccer game? What is the real message here? The message is that you're a "cool" parent if you work like crazy and shuttle your kids around in that vehicle, without understanding the true meaning of sport. It's not about busing kids and making them little professionals, youth sport is about growth, development and joy.

The other destructive influence in our culture is the idea of being fanatical. Where do we learn that its acceptable to fanatically abuse people at sporting events? We come back to social learning again. Have you seen the image that the NFL is promoting on television? They show Billy Bob again, a 270 pound fat boy, who on Sunday morning puts on his jersey to watch a game on TV while jamming his face with cheesy poofs. The following message urges the viewers, "its what football is all about". What a load of rubbish. Don't get me wrong, football is a fantastic game requiring supreme amounts of athleticism, strength, courage and organization. But this is not football. The NFL is teaching passive, uninformed voyeurism and that's part of the problem that has crept into our youth games. We need a higher standard for our children's experiences.

One of our country's prominent sport sociologist is Richard Lapchick from Northeastern University, advocates strong measures for abusive parents. "Very few programs around the country have taken the approach that if you have a parent cross the line, you can't attend games anymore".

Finding Solutions.....Silent Sunday

Leading the way was the Ohio North's Soccer Association, Karl Pavlovich and Al Soper the brainchild of Silent Sunday. They implemented a program where parents and coaches were not allowed to cheer, or jeer. The kids loved it and commented that they could think clearly for themselves. Parents had some initial difficulties because they thought it their obligation to be vocal. It is now a regular event that parents meet with creative anticipation. Silent Sunday has been significant and has prompted some dramatic changes in the way we teach coaches and parents.

Coaching education around the country has followed Silent Sunday lead. Tom Turner developed an ethics chapter in his small sided games teaching as a compendium to parents and coaches. Many coaching programs are trying to educate parents in developmental issues, rules of the game, strategy and communication skills. This is a constant process according to Roby Stahl coaching director from Ohio South. Stahl advocates parent-coach meetings to bring parents into the game and communicate the developmental activities for the kids. Coaches are required to identify seasonal goals as well as teaching the basic rules and etiquette of the game. The result has been positive according to Stahl. We still need more accountability from both coaches and parents.

Other professional educators have begun to address this issue. The Positive Coaching Alliance from Stanford University, provides state of the art workshops for coaches and parents. As well, many communities are requiring parents to attend and pass mandatory parental training. Occasionally there are some teeth added to these educational formats. Abusive parents are subject to a variety of restrictions if they cross the line at youth games. Leagues have adopted red cards for parents, the fifty cent fine, removal, and stopping games as measures, that attempt to curb poor behavior.

Generation X in thirty years

You may think that I was hard on old Billy Bob, however I have done workshops that converted the most abusive into model sport parents. The majority of parents are decent, loving and effective role models. I'm also a parent and had profound experiences of joy when my son took his first steps, and pick up my hockey stick. However, I am also faced with the pressures of protecting my family, providing opportunities for success in a high achieving society. To help us as parents, we all need a helpful soccer education and role models for parenting. I sat in the stands with a national team coach who was watching his seven year old son play a game. As we watched, all the players gravitated like a magnet to the ball. We chuckled and enjoyed the moment. The other parents recognized him as a former pro and national team coach. Amazingly they began to urge and plead with him to fix the players, that "they are playing wrong". They screamed, "Go on the field and do something"! The wise parent sat back,

"That is what they have to figure out".

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