

The Role of Parents in Sportsmanship (2003 First Place)

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A child's parents are the most influential role models in life. Although superstar athletes and pop stars may adorn the bedroom walls of the next generation, their influence is dwarfed in comparison to that of the people that have worked to build those walls, buy those posters, and heat that room. The values instilled during youth are the parameters that define character, and that character is the basis for life, athletic or otherwise. The character of an individual determines whom one admires, what one believes, and how one handles himself. Parents are the roots from which their children grow, for better or for worse.

The way in which children are raised establishes their view of competition. If growing up they are bombarded with questions relating to how many points they scored, if coach played them enough, or the fairness of the referee, it establishes one type of sportsman. On the other hand, if they are greeted with questions associated with their enjoyment of the game, the quality of their opponent, or if any of their teammates will be coming over for dinner, it cultivates a very different kind of sportsman. While the latter will tend to view sports as a happy social medium with the additional enjoyment of competition, the other will tend to feel pressure to outperform his opponents and teammates alike, and depart with memories consumed by the final values on the scoreboard.

This outlook on priorities may be the single most defining characteristic among athletes. Most readily witnessed at the conclusion of a game, it can be seen in who stamps off pouting to the showers in self-loathing or who sticks around to get to know the rivals and discuss the universal disdain for sloppy joes and mystery meat. Competition is often intense and makes sport what it is, but one must be able to funnel that intensity into performance as opposed to cheap shots, and know when and how to shut it off. It is the coach's job to get his team to play to the apex of their potential, but all too often this coach has a dozen or more unofficial assistants. In the middle of homework and in between bites at the breakfast table are not the time or the place for coaching. The responsibility of a parent is to make sure that the place sports held in their child's heart growing up continues to maintain its residence throughout high school and beyond. No little kid picks up a wiffleball bat because he feels the need to put in a hard day's work.

Although words of encouragement and lectures on priorities can get a child on the right track, they are worth nothing without example. The hypocritical nature of some parents in the stands is not only counterproductive, but also embarrassing. Whether it is a parent's inability to control their emotions or their need to live vicariously through their children, everything they've taught can be thrown away with a single obscene gesture or slip of the tongue. A parent can't ask more of a child than they can expect from themselves and they must expect a lot of themselves when it comes to sportsmanship, the backbone and greatness of high school athletics.