

Parent's Role in Youth Athletics

By Tom Doyle, Athletic Director at Seattle Prep
(Parent of swimmers)

Do you ever wonder what athletes think when their parents scream at officials, get kicked out of contests or taunt other players? Do you ever wonder how your sons or daughters would like you to act in the stands? I recently asked our fall-sport athletes what goes through their minds at those times and was surprised by their passionate reactions.

We know that the goals of high-school sports programs include providing students with healthy activities, teaching them skills, helping them to be better citizens, teammates and communicators.

Nowhere is there mention of an athletic program existing for the parents.

The parents' role is that of a spectator. Too many parents become over-involved in their child's athletic experience.

Nationwide, the incidences of abuse toward officials, coaches and other parents are rising dramatically. Last year, a hockey parent was convicted and sentenced to a long prison term for killing a coach after an argument. Officials are leaving the profession in large numbers because they no longer want to face the anger and negative remarks they hear at every contest.

More and more coaches cite parent conflicts as reasons for taking time off, changing jobs or giving up on coaching altogether. More and more kids are choosing to play only one sport, or dropping out of sports completely, because of the pressure they feel from their parents.

What will our programs be like five years from now if this continues? We are at a crisis point and must make efforts today to bring sanity back to our programs.

Our sons and daughters who play high-school sports seem to have a grasp of the gravity of the situation. They instinctively know how their parents ought to behave at contests. The players asked me to plead with their parents to refrain from:

• trying to teach them how to do something "correctly" after a game.

• Coaching during games when they aren't the coach.

• Being asked to leave a field by an official.

• Taunting other players, opponents, refs.

• Yelling things at coaches.

• Coming to a game drunk or after drinking.

• Acting disappointed with what the athletes are doing instead of reassuring them that they will do better next time.

Our athletes asked me to encourage their parents:

• To come to their contests and cheer for the team.

• To not get frustrated if their kid isn't playing well or the team is losing.

• To not become too involved in their kids' sports lives.

• To stay in the stands and know their role.

• To encourage regardless of performance.

• To not be angry at the player or the coach if their son/daughter doesn't play.

• To relax and let kids have fun.

• To not make a scene.

• To remember it is their child's team.

• To understand that it is not a life-or-death situation; it is just a game.

Your sons and daughters hope to see you on the sideline, along the course, or in the bleachers often this fall. Nothing is quite as entertaining as high-school sports. Make a difference by taking to heart our student-athletes' advice, and support our athletes by promoting good sportsmanship and common sense at contests this year.

About the author: Tom Doyle, beginning his 21st year as athletic director at Seattle Prep, has been a high-school teacher, coach and sports administrator in Seattle for over 30 years. The 52-year-old father of two has coached baseball, football and girls basketball and is past president and current treasurer of the state's organization of athletic directors.