**A coach’s plea to parents**

**Alison Belbin** is passing on her love of the game. So why does she get so much interference from the sidelines?

I am here, on time.

My mortgage is two-weeks late; my oldest child is suffering through a medication change and trouble at school; my youngest child begged me not to leave, and my husband and I haven’t looked each other in the eye for days. I spent much of the day holding my aging dog as she recovered from a seizure. But none of this matters now. I am here. I compose myself and prepare for the next 90 minutes on the field with your child. And mine; she has already leapt from the car and disappeared into the growing crowd of girls.

Sometimes you wave as you drive away, and sometimes you don’t. It usually depends if we won the previous weekend and if you felt your child had been given an appropriate amount of play time. Your daughter is funny and kind and thoughtful. And tonight your daughter had a great practice. She struggled with a new skill and shook off a solid smack to her ear from a ball. And, we laughed. She also told me something that has been bothering her, asking shyly that I not tell anyone. I explained why she was subbed off last game. She nodded in agreement and asked how to get better. We hugged, she thanked me, and we moved on.

She likes a boy, she hates her thighs. Her best friend ignored her today and she still has difficult homework to get through after practice. She got her period in art class. And yet she’s here with me in the freezing rain, our cleats rotting and our noses dripping. She is here because her team provides a safe shield from the outside world.

We sweat together, we celebrate together and we all feel the same sting of defeat when the bounce of the ball is not in our favour. We step on the field with the best intentions. We try. I always leave the field a better person than when I arrived. In the time it takes me to drive home, dry off and microwave my dinner, you have hastily typed an e-mail. My youngest has fallen asleep on the couch and my husband is cleaning the kitchen while I sit at the table alone, reading how you feel I’ve let your child down.

You believe last weekend’s loss was due to my poor decisions. Your daughter would have scored the winning goal if I only had subbed her in earlier or let her play a different position. You believe they aren’t playing like a team should. You watched a Premier League game and they seem so much more in tune with each other. It’s a shame, I think, that you missed the girls hugging and cheering each other on tonight while you were at the coffee shop around the corner.

If we win, I’ll read that it’s because the more talented girls got too much playing time; that I’m too competitive; that I’m pushing them too hard; that I’ve managed to crush the souls of the players on the bench. If we lose, it’s because I played the developing players too much; I am ruining the stronger players’ chance at future glory; I’m not pushing them hard enough. What do we even do during practice anyway?

I know what you’ve told her about me and I know what you’ve said about her teammates. And yet, your daughter and I both keep showing up. We keep trying. I may not do it the way you would. I may not speak to your daughter the way you would, but she needs more than one voice in her head.

I am not a professional. I am a parent who loves the game and has the desire to pass that on. I accepted the role I was offered; not for a paycheck, not for status, certainly not for praise. I accepted this role because I have been where your daughter is now. I see myself in her missteps and in her triumphs. I have felt them all and I feel them all over again through her. I, too, have been bruised by a ball, pulled muscles in tough tackles and played with a broken heart. I also had coaches who believed in me, just as I believe in your daughter.

Knowing I had someone in my corner who challenged me and called out my excuses was the greatest reward of my years in sport. I vaguely remember the final scores of even the most important games, but I sure remember how I felt. Winning doesn’t promise pride, just as losing doesn’t guarantee disappointment.

One of my parents’ great gifts to me was their unwavering support of my coaches. They never wrote a letter, made a complaint phone call or disrespected a coach – even when my eyes stung and I desperately needed it to be someone else’s fault. It was my team, my game, my experience to have.

I learned early on that my coach was neither my parent nor my friend. I admired them and sought their praise. I hated them sometimes, too. If I thought I deserved a higher standing on that team, it was up to me to earn it. My parents sure weren’t going to earn it for me.

Criticizing your child’s coach might simply be a reflection of your insecurities or long-held regrets as a former player. That’s okay. We all have them. As adults we can understand this, but as a child, your daughter does not. She is being pulled in opposing directions between her team and her parent’s opinion of her team. On her team, she is finding her identity and her place among her peers. It is here she will decide if that place makes her feel whole and satisfied, or if it makes her edgy and hungry for more.

Let her discover this, on her own. Let her play.

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