

The Balance Of Pressure And Support In Raising Youth Athletes

Dr. Jon Coles is the Associate Athletic Director at Ferris State University, a former Division 1 tennis player and father of two young sons playing five sports. He recently interviewed hundreds of scholarship student athletes, playing different sports, from different socioeconomic backgrounds and at different divisions. He wanted to find out the effect their parents had on their sports lives.

ILTWYP: How did this study come about?

Dr. Coles: I am concerned about the direction of youth sports in this country. Our participation rates are declining and because parents play such a major role in their child's experience, I wanted to seek some answers from the true participants. I thought college athletes would be the perfect subjects as they are removed from their parents and are able to reflect, and they're old enough to have seen a large spectrum of parenting styles.

ILTWYP: What is the definition of support versus pressure?

Dr. Coles: The student athletes wanted to be pushed to try different sports as young children, but they didn't want to be pushed when they were in high school. They felt pressured when their parents talked about needing a scholarship, or the investment they made, or when they were told they needed to practice more. I was most interested in the "how" and "why". How did their parents support or pressure them and why do you think they acted the way they did?

Summary Of The Findings

#1 Those who thought they had the best youth experience had parents who didn't play their sport.

The majority (I had one male who adamantly disagreed with this conclusion)...thought that if the parents know too much, they try to coach. In high school, they don't want a parent who coaches. They want a parent who provides support and unconditional love. I had one female say, "I was much better off than my teammates, because my parents had absolutely no clue about my sport."

#2 Moms are better than dads in stressful sporting situations.

In recruiting showcases, high level tournaments, generally speaking the dads want to coach and prepare their kids. Moms want them to try their best. Moms were a much more calming influence on the subjects than dads.

#3 Parents should be less involved as the sport becomes more serious.

They wanted their parents involved at the basic youth level when the goal was fun and participation. However, as they get to the 8th grade level and high school, when it's becoming more serious, they don't want as much "game talk" from parents.

#4 Parents and their kids should have more meaningful discussions about goals.

As a father, this hit home with me. They wanted their parents to know what their goals were at each level and how the parents could support them. Each participant remembered one specific serious sit-down discussion in which they told their parents about their goal of playing in college.

#5 Don't dissect and discuss the game, unless the athlete initiates.

Particularly, when the student athletes were in high school, they (especially the women) did not enjoy talking about the actual game at dinner/post game. This is something that a lot of the experts have been saying for years and was reinforced by the participants. A female athlete said it best, "I don't think my dad realized that I talk about the game during school, before the game, during the game, and after the game with my coach and teammates. At the end, I'm burned out. I don't want to talk about it anymore."

#6 Kids should play multiple sports growing up.

They were adamant about this. I had one participant whose father made her choose a sport in middle school and she burned out. She quit playing for over a year. She told her father that if she started playing again, that he couldn't be involved.

#7 You can't want it more than your child!

Over Involved Parents are ones who want it worse than the participants do. Yes, all but one participant said this was a problem. If they want it more than the kids, they are too emotional about it. When the student athletes see the emotion, they get panicked and feel pressure.

#8 Student athletes can't be manufactured.

Optimal parents support but don't push. Collegiate student athletes can't be manufactured. This should be the main takeaway for us parents. I had an amazing experience traveling the country getting scholarship money for a sport that I loved. However, it's not for everybody. It may not be what my kids want and it's important to realize that. Every single participant said that the drive that it takes to compete at the college level...not everyone has. It's something in you that parents cannot create.