



Providing information to individuals and teams seeking optimal performance

Coaches and Parents and Codes... Oh My!

Coaches tell me that the vast majority of interactions with the parents of their athletes are quite reasonable. However, they also note that when problems with parents occur, they can be quite dramatic. Consider the following recent news items:

An article from the New York Times (Pennington, 2005) described the following situation: On May 17, 2005, the father of a softball player at a northeastern private all-girls Catholic high school hit his daughter's coach in the head with an aluminum bat six times. The reason? The coach had suspended the softball player for missing a game to attend a prom.

According to chicagobreakingnews.com (Fuller, 2009), on May 18, 2009, a Bristol, Wisconsin father was charged with battery and criminal damage to property after hitting the coach of the opposing youth baseball team, causing cuts and bruises and breaking the coach's glasses. The reason? The father thought the coach said something negative about his son during the game. By the way, the attack occurred during the after-game handshake line.

Finally, and closer to home, in May of 2007, a Ft. Payne couple was arrested for harassing their daughter's cheerleading sponsor. The reason? Their daughter was not selected to be head cheerleader (WAFF, 2007).

After reading the above examples, it is not hard to see why coaches would be concerned. The above news stories are extreme but represent only a small fraction of interactions that coaches have with parents. Almost every coach I have spoken to, from little league to college, has reported that when they have problems with parents, the problems do take up a significant part of a coach's time; time they could be using to help their athletes (including the problem parent's child) become better at their sport.

When we think of problem parents, the

image of an adult living vicariously through the achievements of their children may come to mind. When things do not go well for their children, these parents act as if things are not going well for them. In my experience, these parents certainly exist but are rare. More common are two other types of parents.

The first of these are parents who have unrealistic expectations about their child's abilities and have a sense of entitlement as a result. These are the parents who feel their child is the next Peyton Manning or Lisa Leslie. If you do not immediately recognize their son or daughter for the elite athlete he or she is, then there is obviously something wrong with you. A great example of this is depicted in the second season of the TV show, *Friday Night Lights*.

The second type of problem parent is the parent who is supportive until they believe that their child's team is not being handled competently. These parents may leap up the chain of command and insist that the Director of Athletics, Principal, or even the School Board remove the coach.

Taking Control of the Situation

It can be very easy to think of problem parents as the enemy. However, in order to find a working solution, it is critical that the coach (and the administrators involved) avoid this.

Putting the issue in perspective is a good start. This begins by remembering that most parents care deeply about their children and are trying to act as their child's advocate. It is also important that the coach take care to avoid taking out frustration on the child of a problem parent or on the problem parent himself or herself. Acting on the frustration will only make a bad situation worse. Consult a trusted colleague and get feedback on how you are interacting with those involved. If the feedback suggests that you have acted

unprofessionally, think through the situation and then spend some time using imagery to rehearse your interactions. The imagery issues of this newsletter (available from the website) go into this in more detail. Learning some relaxation exercises that work for you can also help in this situation.

Taking control of the problem also requires a proactive approach. The establishment of a code of conduct prior to a school year (or season if outside of school) starting, can make a big difference. This can be accomplished by sitting down with the stakeholders, such as coaches, parents, and administrators, in order to define what is and what is not acceptable behavior for all involved and deciding what the consequences are for behavior deemed inappropriate.

Once the code of conduct is established, all of the stakeholders need to "buy in" to the code and its enforcement. This includes superintendents, directors of athletics, all coaches, and booster clubs or other parent groups. Finally, the code needs to be presented to the parents of the athletes involved prior to start of the season. I suggest they sign a written copy of the code as a condition for allowing their child to play.

Obviously, going into the specifics of systemic change is beyond the scope of a single newsletter. It is hoped that this newsletter will motivate those interested to go to the next step of putting appropriate policies and procedures into effect. This will go a long way to ensure that all those involved in sports will have a rewarding experience. A good example of this process in action is Maine's Sports Done Right, a description of which can be found at www.sportsdoneright.org.

For more information about this topic or any other topic related to mental skills or sport psychology, contact your local sport psychologist.

This bi-monthly publication is being offered to you free of charge. You may share this newsletter with others as long as it is distributed in its entirety. If you prefer not to receive a copy, either call 256-551-4479 or send an email to moncierj@uasomh.uab.edu. Use these same methods to request additional copies of *Performance Enhancement News*, to request an electronic version, or to be placed on the mailing list. Back issues of *Performance Enhancement News* can be found on the web at: www.monciersportpsychology.com.

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To schedule a sport psychology consultation with Dr. Moncier, call 256-551-4479. Questions regarding sport psychology services can be directed to Dr. Moncier via email at moncierj@uasomh.uab.edu. Further information about either sport psychology in general or Dr. Moncier's practice in particular can be found at: www.monciersportpsychology.com.

References

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Announcement: UAB Sport Psychology's Mental Toughness Boot Camp

Developing mental toughness is a process that is only now becoming more completely understood. UAB Sport Psychology has created a course to help athletes develop the skills consistent with the emerging literature regarding mental toughness.

This course focuses on helping the individual athlete develop self-awareness of mental strengths and areas needing more work. Additionally, participants will learn a variety of mental skills used by elite athletes in order to further develop their own mental toughness, such as controlling emotions, self-talk, and focus; managing energy; and using imagery as a performance tool. These skills form the basis of the individual athlete's pre-performance routines, regrouping plans, and general mental preparation strategies that will allow him or her to perform to the best of his or her abilities. Participants will also learn ways to incorporate mental toughness training into physical practices and their life in general in order to make the most out of both.

The next round of the course will start on September 22, 2009. It will meet one night per week for 10 weeks at UAB-Huntsville from 6:00-7:30 pm. The course will be limited to 25 athletes ages 15 and older. There will be homework between each class. At the end of the course, each participant will have a notebook that they can use to continue to guide them as they strengthen their mental toughness long after the class is over. For a more detailed description and for registration materials, go to www.moncier.com and follow the "Mental Toughness Course" link. Registration ends September 14, 2009.

You can now hear Dr. Moncier on the radio on WUMP (730 AM or 103.9 FM) at 3:30 pm on Tuesday afternoons during "The Johnny 'Ballpark' Franks Show" which airs from 3:00 to 6:00 pm M-F. If you are not in the North Alabama area or do not have access to a radio at work, you can listen to the show by directing your computer's web browser to www.730ump.com and clicking on the "On Air Now" link at the upper right corner of the page.