

# PARENTS – CRITICS OR FANS?

By Karen Coffin

**D**ealing with parents of athletes has become a huge part of every coach's job. Sometimes, the relationship is open warfare. The No. 1 cause of coaching resignations is conflict with parents. Criticism and interference flourish, even in winning programs. The complaints are universal: playing time, positions/events, discipline problems, sport knowledge and abusive treatment. The list goes on.

Many a good coach, after getting hammered by critics, decides he or she has "had enough" and leaves the job. It's too draining to spend so much time and energy only to get attacked by the very people whose children you're trying to help. Coaches need to actively seek solutions to this problem and find ways to turn critics into fans.

It is very common for coaches who are under attack to get so frustrated and angry that they just stop listening. They simply want to get back to coaching their team. Members of the coaching staff will complain to each other about the parents who are shooting arrows at them. The coaches will circle the wagons to defend themselves, make plans for the future and wait for the attack to subside. Unfortunately, the attackers don't go away. They round up reinforcements and shoot more arrows. Ignoring the problems does not make them go away.

Coaches must realize that dealing with parents is part of the job. The coaching profession must take the lead in reversing the adversarial trend, so sports can be a positive experience for everyone involved. Coaches must be proactive in dealing with parents. Mutual respect must be facilitated. Coaches need to develop a philosophy about the role of parents and plan how to work constructively with them. Good communication is the key to establishing the kind of rapport necessary to make cooperation possible.

## Include Parents as Part of the Team

Begin by recognizing that parents (anyone legally responsible for the student) are an integral part of your team. Every athlete has a three-part support system: coaches, parents and teammates. If any one of those parts crumble or work in opposition to another, the athlete's success is at risk. Parents are largely responsible for the physical and emotional health

of their child. You need these adults to do a good job, and you must guide them in the process.

Parents and coaches have basically the same goals. Both want the team to win and the players to be successful. The sticking point is that coaches need to be concerned with all team members and the parents are primarily interested in their own child. No parent can be impartial, even if they try. Nearly all parents will evaluate your coaching techniques by how they affect their own child. It may not be stated that way, but it will be the basis of their opinions.

It's an uncomfortable thought, but parents can be right about why their child isn't performing better. No one knows them or watches them more than their parents. Whether or not you agree with them, if you listen to their comments, you may gain insight into the situation. The parent has the satisfaction of being heard and sometimes that is enough to calm things down. After hearing the coach's side, the issue may be resolved.

## Recognize the Parents' Contribution

Parents make a significant financial and emotional investment in their child's athletic career. They spend a lot of money for equipment, camps, lessons, tournaments and travel. The time commitment can be huge, especially in sports which require year-round participation. Consider the burdens placed on families as you make schedules and plan for off-season activities.

In recent years, because of their investment, parents have become very aggressive in managing their child's activities. This includes intervening when something doesn't go well. Teachers and coaches receive most of the questions and complaints. It is aggravating to be defending yourself and explaining decisions, but it is something you need to anticipate doing. Coaches can prevent many problems by being proactive. Let parents get to know you and how you run your program. Keep them informed. Yes, this does take valuable time, but it is well worth it to avoid problems. Dealing with even one disgruntled parent takes an enormous toll on your time and energy.

## Communicate Well and Often

It is essential to have a preseason meeting with parents.



It's much more than a time to hand out rules and regulations. This is a golden opportunity to convey your coaching philosophy and what can be expected from you during the season. It is also a time to forge the partnership you want to have with the parents. Address the things that are likely to be misunderstood: roster cuts, playing-time decisions, discipline codes, transportation policies and more. Prepare a handout that includes all the information that may affect a player on and off the field.

Equally important, this is when you spell out to parents how to help their kids. Dealing with the personal needs of their children is their major responsibility. Proper nourishment, enough rest and academic priorities are essential. Insisting on appropriate behavior and cultivating a respect for rules and referees will help players handle adversity and stay out of trouble. Emotional support and parental love matter to every athlete. Help mom and dad understand that home needs to be a safe refuge from too much pressure.

The preseason meeting is also when you teach parents how to be great fans. When and how to cheer, the importance of sportsmanship, and the support of effort as well as success are samples of principles you can teach. You also need to convey the message that you are willing to talk with parents one on one, but set boundaries about how and when that can happen. Protect your family and team time by insisting that appointments be made for discussions.

### Use Personal Communication to Great Effect

Parents will be watching intently as you work with their children during competition. Any sign of encouragement or approval from you goes a long way in turning a critic into a fan. Receiving a pat on the shoulder, a fist pump, a clapping of hands, a positive note or a call from a coach are treasured moments for the player and family. Let parents hear you address the team before or after a game. Convince them you value all players, not just the stars.

### Prevent Communication Problems

Some precautions are needed. Sending verbal messages home with players isn't enough. Use a reliable phone chain, e-mail or text messages instead. If you plan a radical line-up change, consider alerting the parents of the affected kids. If

they better understand what is happening and why, they are likely to accept the change better. It also helps them save face with nearby fans.

Never compare one player with another, even when talking about playing time. Do be prepared to privately talk about what a player needs to do to improve. By the way, almost every parent believes that their child just needs a chance to show what he or she can do. Few think the coach gets it right unless their kid plays every minute of every game. Moms don't understand that better players get preference and they feel a depth chart is unfair. Dads think the coach is either stupid or playing favorites.

### Be Proactive

Caution your assistants that they may receive the angry protests intended for the head coach. They will certainly be pumped for information. Good assistants can help diffuse problems and protect you from some angry confrontations. Spend time with them discussing how to handle different situations. Keep your athletic director informed about serious conflicts. Some parents are notorious for their interference and you may need help in dealing with them.

Supportive parents are essential to the success of your program. Earn their friendship and respect and they will be a great asset. When they know that you care about every player, they will defend you. Parents may even take your side when their kids complain! Fan support for your program can be more than putting on team feeds and raising money. It can be personal. Enthusiasm for you and your program will grow.

Develop a positive partnership and parents will trust you with their most precious possessions – their children. **CQ**

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Karen Coffin retired from the Port Clinton, Ohio, school system after serving as a tennis coach and physical education teacher for more than 20 years. After retirement, she presented seminars for coaches and taught coaching classes at the college level. She writes a newspaper column for parents and coaches involved in youth sports and is a facilitator for the NFHS Coach Education classes. She is a member of the Port Clinton High School Athletic Hall of Fame. She may be contacted at [coachcoffin@cros.net](mailto:coachcoffin@cros.net).

