

The Role of Parents in Sport: Discussions with Coaches Geoff Marsh (Cricket), Joyce Brown (Netball) and Lindsay Gaze (Basketball).

By Wayne Goldsmith

In response to repeated community complaints, a Sydney Council announced it planned to introduce the following policy:

CITY OF BOTANY – CODE OF CONDUCT – SPORTS FIELD USERS.

“At its meeting of 26th May 1999, Council endorsed the following policy direction as outlined in the Mayoral Minutes No 5/99 and resolved:

THAT – “Council as a matter of policy, determine that any sporting activity being run by an Association or Club, on any ground within the City of Botany Bay, have lodged with Council, as a condition of use of Council’s playing fields, a Code of Conduct, which is to be subject to Council’s approval”.

Objective – Via Sporting Associations and Club Codes of Conduct, ensure the safety and enjoyment of all officials, participants and spectators that use Council’s sporting grounds for organised sport.

Procedures:

- Each Club / Association is to make persons associated with their sport aware of Council’s Policy when using its grounds and is to provide Council with a copy of their Code of Conduct that reflects the objective and procedures of Council’s policy.
- Persons attending sporting fixtures (whatever their capacity – official, player, **parent** or spectator) are not to engage in verbal or physical abuse of officials, players, **parents** or spectators.
- Persons that undertake such actions and are reported to Council will firstly be reported to the Club and Association and these organisations will be asked to provide information on what action they have taken or propose to take. A warning will be issued to the offending club with which the person is associated. No penalty will ensue but the club is to ensure the person is aware of this warning.
- In regard to a second offence the person will be suspended from Council’s grounds for one (1) week and the team the person is associated with will also receive a one (1) week suspension (forfeit the match relating to the incident).
- Third and subsequent offences will be treated in the same fashion as second offences, however three (3) week suspensions will apply.
- If Council is of the view that offences are of a very serious nature, then Council reserves the right to either extend the suspension or ban the person for a period that it deems appropriate.

(Appreciation to the City of Botany Bay Council’s - Mr Kevin Lowe for his kind permission to reprint this daring initiative)

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How does a positive, healthy and enjoyable activity as competitive sport require the introduction of such a policy?

What makes parents transform from positive, supportive role models into DADDY DEMONS AND MUMMY MONSTERS????

Why are sporting parents often a source of frustration for coaches and athletes when they could be (and should be) a key factor in the sporting success of their children?

I asked three of Australia's greatest Coaches, Geoff Marsh, Joyce Brown and Lindsay Gaze their thoughts on this controversial topic.

Their understanding of Australian sport is somewhat unique. Geoff, Joyce and Lindsay have contributed significantly to Australian sport as athletes and coaches at the highest national and international level. Now as parents of successful athletes they are helping to develop another generation of champions. They have experienced the Australian sports system from all perspectives and are well qualified to comment on the sport and parenting issue.

GEOFF MARSH, International Cricketer, Australian Cricket Coach to the Australian World Cup Winning Cricket Team in 1999, Father.

What did your parents do that contributed to your success as a cricketer?

My parents were enormously supportive – they recognised at an early age that there was some potential for me to achieve. They allowed me to naturally enjoy my sport and they were supportive without applying the usual parental pressure. Some of my fondest memories came from the fun that was had as a kid growing up on our farm.

What are the characteristics of a successful sporting parent?

To give as much support to the child as possible and to be there to motivate when it is needed during the difficult times. To encourage them to always do their best and to enjoy their peers' success as well as their own.

What are some of the common mistakes that sporting parents make?

Sporting parents often make common mistakes. They often attempt to live their failed sporting lives through their own kids. This type of parent is also the one who will constantly and openly criticise umpires in front of their child and their peers.

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What is the difference between a supportive parent and a pushy parent?

A supportive parent allows a child to think for themselves. They also encourage and motivate the child when it is required. A pushy parent often criticises and never allows the child to develop or process their own thoughts.

As a sporting parent yourself, how are handling the sporting careers of your own children?

Both my wife and myself have made the very best attempts at raising our children. Obviously my commitment to cricket as a player and later a coach made it difficult to combine the dual role as a sporting parent, given the frequent times I that was away from home. For the limited time available a large degree of credit must go to my wife Michelle who has done a fantastic job in my absence.

I guess we have already had first hand experience with our son Shaun who has a burning desire ever since he was a child to play (cricket) for Australia. Obviously we are both very supportive and proud of how he is fulfilling his dreams. We have always emphasised that education is equally important and that there must be a balance between sport and education.

How did you balance your sport and education as an athlete?

In my case I guess I was intensely focussed from a very young age that I was going to represent Australia and that everything else, certainly for a while, sailed into insignificance. It was during the formative years (12-14 year of age) that my natural sporting ability was being recognised by others that gave me the encouragement to focus on sport. I t wasn't until much later that I realised the critical importance of education.

What's the best advice your parents gave your about your sporting career?

It is difficult to remember any specific advice that I would consider the best – it was more generalised. My parents emphasised sportsmanship at all times and installed in me at a young age to not only enjoy my own success but also to enjoy the success of others.

What advice can you give to parents of young sportspeople?

Giving specific advice is not often effective because as we all know all kids are different and individual needs must be treated accordingly. Personally I am all for allowing kids to enjoy their sport and allow their natural ability to develop to a point until they are of an age that they can benefit from the advice given to them. Too often I see the results of kids that have been pushed too hard too early and as a result their full potential is often never achieved.

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If Geoff Marsh was 12 years of age and starting out all over again, would you do anything different?

As they say “hindsight” is a wonderful thing. In terms of my career and the raising of our children I would not change a thing. In terms of my schooling the balance that I spoke of earlier in my case was weighted more towards sport than education. I guess in a perfect world it would have been nice to balanced things a bit better, although that might have detracted from my cricket achievements. Through the “life education” that I have received and the fantastic opportunities as well as people that I have met along the way, I feel my life experiences have given me the greatest education that one could ever hope for.

JOYCE BROWN, Australian Netballer, Three Times Australian Netball Coach to Win World Championships, Mother of Carlton AFL Footballer Fraser Brown, Teacher.

What did your own parents do that contributed to your success as an athlete?”

My family had an athletic culture. Dad was an athlete. But the thing they gave me most was “time”. By time, I mean time to enjoy and develop my sporting career. Not pushing, just supporting. They very much had a “have a go” attitude. As a female athlete they encouraged me to express myself physically.

What are some of the mistakes parents of young netballers can make?

Some parents try to live out unfulfilled sporting careers through their children. Some believe that their child is the only child with talent. Others think of their kids as a “meal ticket” – a financial bonus to be exploited.

As a coach it worries me that some parents expect too much too early and might be tempted to give their child extra work (in addition to that set by the coach). Parents sometimes think they know more than the coach and interfere with the coaches careful planning of their child’s development. A young athlete needs only one coach!

3. What is the difference between a “supportive parent” and a pushy parent?”.

I think my definition of a supportive parent is a thinking parent. An absent parent is better than a pushy parent. At least the youngster can become self reliant rather than pushed, prodded and twisted.

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4. What are the characteristics of a successful sporting parent?

A parent who can stand back and look at their young athlete clearly and objectively and give them space to develop. To have a belief in the child and the child's well being. The sporting parent needs to provide the support structure and be a support for their child. To allow the coach to coach – by resisting the temptation to coach the child themselves. To feed the child well. Make sure they sleep well and ensure that they have fun and balance in their family life. That they encourage their kids to learn to work hard and to learn how to be an athlete. That includes lifestyle issues like not drinking and not smoking. I have met athletes with talent and the dreams to succeed but fewer who also had the character to work hard to achieve through self-discipline.

5. How do young athletes balance sport and their school?

I often tell young athletes that they are only an injury away from nothing. It is important that they develop a balance in their life and to become skilled or qualified in a field other than sport. That they know who they are as a person and not just as an athlete. It can be a difficult balancing act but well worth it. It takes self-discipline and it can be socially uncomfortable.

6. What is the best piece of advice your parents ever gave you about your sporting career?

Go for it and enjoy it.

7. What advice can you give to the parents of young netballers?

Find a knowledgeable and caring coach. Allow your children the space and the opportunity to work with that coach. Be positive. Help the kids find a hero in the sport. Don't push – just support. Remember that your child may not be "God's gift" to the game. Make sure that the kids develop a good network of friends. Keep up to the mark with their school work.

8. When you are looking for talented young players, what characteristics do you look for?

I don't look so much at physique or physical characteristics. I look for their skills at handling a ball and for what I call their coachability – their ability to take coaching instructions and learn well. I look for their passion and desire to play with a ball. For their spirit and their sense of fun and enjoyment at playing. The heart and mind together with skills catch my attention the most.

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LINDSAY GAZE, Basketball Coach of the Melbourne Tigers, Olympic Coach, Dad – Father of Andrew Gaze, Grandad.

1. **What would you say are the characteristics of a successful sporting parent? (ie - sporting parent meaning a parent of someone playing sport).**

One who is supportive without being assertive. Someone who is available to respond when advice is sought, but is not the provider of constant advice. One who allows their son or daughter to “discover” and determine their own goals.

2. **From your experience, what are some of the common mistakes sporting parents make?**

Reliving their own successes or failure through their children. Wanting (or demanding) they fulfil the parents ambitions rather than their own. Intervening on the coaches instructions and providing their own coaching advice. I believe in the old saying “The Fruit Never Falls Far from the Tree”. Often the difficulties we experience dealing with athletes is a reflection of some behaviour of the parents. I also believe that the influence of parents can impact on the athlete’s life – not just sport. Good parent – good family – good student – good athlete: over 20 years of experience I see a trend there.

3. **What’s the difference between being a supportive parent and a pushy parent?**

A supportive parent will be available to console or to praise in moderation when it is appropriate. A pushy parent is more likely to be dissatisfied with a good effort and aim to expect more. A pushy parent is more likely to intrude on a particular selection process and seek ways of drawing attention to their child, overtly or covertly. It is important that athlete, coach and parent discuss issues and communicate openly and regularly.

4. **How did you handle managing your own sporting commitments (and those of your children) with school and education?**

I encouraged my own children (son and daughter) to explore as many sporting options as they could and to allow them to make their own decisions. My wife was a great “taxi driver” supporting the children in gaining access to their sports programs. We directed the children to coaching programs of good quality and did not intervene. I think young athletes should have a go at as many sports as possible, but whatever they the focus should be on fun.

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- 5. What's the best advice your parents ever gave to you about your sporting career? What's the best advice you ever gave to Andrew about his sporting career?**

My mother encouraged me to play sport. She was not keen on me playing football as she was afraid I would get injured (but I never accepted that advice and continued to play). I did get injured many times but it was my own choice to concentrate on basketball after reaching a fairly high level at football. Only Andrew could tell you what is the best advice I gave him.

- 6. Parents of a young basketballer (12-14 years of age) ask you for advice on how to best help their child get to the top. What advice will you give them?**

My advice to young players or parents is to concentrate on working on good technique. If technique is sound then diligent and hard practice will lead to improvement. If technique is unsound then no matter how hard you work the chances of consistent improvement is reduced dramatically. The early developer might be taller, stronger etc because of a rapid rate of development but ultimately, skill is important. I like all young players to learn to play every position. Not to specialise too early in any one role or position. They have plenty of time to specialise as they mature.

- 7. It is suggested that involvement in sports develops characteristics such as confidence, self esteem, self-discipline, goal-orientated behaviour and general fitness. Do you feel this is true and to what extent do the characteristics developed in sporting competition carry over to other areas of life?**

I have been involved long enough and studied enough to be convinced that athlete working towards the elite level can combine their sport with studies and alternate career paths. In fact we have noted that those who succeed with their sport are generally successful with their studies. When recruiting we seek out information about academic abilities and family background.

- 8. If you had your time over, (ie if Andrew was 8 years of age and starting out again) would you do it the same way?**

I don't believe there would be any significant changes to the decision making we made through our childrens' formative years. We gave a lot of thought to whether we should place our children in private schools after graduating from primary school. On reflection I think it was a sound choice at the time to allow them to remain in the state school system. Looking at the same state school system now, I would find it a harder decision to make.

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Summary

The unconditional love and support of a sporting parent is an important contributing factor in the development of young athletes in all sports.

Just as there is no complete manual on how to be a good parent, being a good sporting parent requires training, effort and education.

In the early years, parents are the major influence on the behaviour and development of their children. Once children start school, other people (students, friends, peer group, teachers and coaches) have an increasing influence over the child's behaviour, beliefs and personal standards. However for young children (up to ten years of age) their behaviour is very much a reflection of the behaviours taught, reinforced and accepted by their parents.

In terms of sport, many of the behaviours of successful sports people (commitment to a task, self discipline, determination, confidence, enjoyment of physical activity and a work ethic) can be developed and enhanced by a coach and teacher BUT are ideally established and encouraged by parents. In this way, parents are an important influence on the potential sporting successes of their children.

I would like to thank Geoff, Joyce and Lindsay for their time and the open, honest way they answered the questions. They are outstanding examples of all that is good in coaching – committed, dedicated passionate, caring, and generous professionals.

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