

The Ride Home

By John O'Sullivan



One of the saddest things I had to do as a Director of Coaching for numerous soccer clubs was conduct exit interviews, meetings with players whom had decided to leave the club. Children quit sports for a litany of reasons, and my job was always to see what we could learn, so we could improve the experience for other children.

When I got these players alone, and asked them “what was your least favorite moment in sports?” I often got a very similar and sad answer: ***the ride home after the game.***

It has always amazed me how a moment off the field can have such a detrimental effect on it, yet when we think about it, the toxicity of the ride home makes perfect sense. ***Emotions are high, disappointment, frustration, and exhaustion are heightened for both player and parent, yet many parents choose this moment to confront their child about a play,*** criticize them for having a poor game, and chastise their child, their teammates, their coach, and their opponents. There could not be a less teachable moment in your child’s sporting life than the ride home, yet it is often the moment that well intentioned parents decide to do all of their teaching.

One of the biggest problems on the ride home is that a simple question from you, often meant to encourage your own child, can be construed as an attack on a teammate or coach by your child. As [Bruce Brown states in his book *Teaching Character Through Sport*](#), “athletes do not need adults to question their actions, the actions of other players, or the coach’s decisions concerning strategy or playing time.” A simple comment such as “Why does Jenny get all the shots?” may be meant to construe to your child that you think she is a good shooter who should also take shots, but is interpreted by your daughter that “Jenny is a ball hog!” Questions such as “Why does Billy always play goalie” or “Why does your team always play zone?” can just as easily undermine the coach’s authority, and again cause confusion and uncertainty for your child.

Many children indicated to me that parental actions and conversations after games made them ***feel as though their value and worth in their parents’ eyes was tied to their athletic performance,*** and the wins and losses of their team. Ask yourself whether you are quieter after a hard loss, or happier and more buoyant after a big win. Do you tend to criticize and dissect your child’s performance after a loss, but overlook many of the same mistakes because he or she won? If you see that you are doing this, even though your intentions may be well meaning, your child’s perceptions of your words and actions can be quite detrimental to their performance, and to your relationship.

One of the things that Coach Brown urges parents to be a source of confidence and comfort in situations such as when your child has played well in a loss, when your child has played poorly, and especially when your child has played very little or not at all. Even then, it is critically important that you do not bring the game up for them, as uninvited conversations may cause resentment in children. Give them the time and space to digest the game and recover physically and emotionally

from a match. When your child is ready to bring the game up and talk about it, be a quiet and reflective listener, and make sure she can see the big picture and not just the outcome of a single event. Help her work through the game, and facilitate her growth and education by guiding her toward her own answers. Kids learn a lot when they realize things such as “we had a bad week of practice and coach told us this was coming” Most importantly says Brown, remember that your child always loves hearing you sincerely tell them “I love watching you play.”

The ***only exception to the above ‘Ride Home’ rule is when your child engages in behavior that you would not accept at home***, such as spitting, cursing, assaulting an opponent, or disrespecting a coach or authority figure. In these cases you should initiate the conversation, not as a parent to an athlete, but as a parent to a child. Even then you must be careful and considerate of the emotions of the match, and choose your words wisely. Deal with the issue, and then put it to bed; do not use it as a segue to a discussion of the entire game.

Not every child is the same, and some children may want to discuss the game on the way home. My advice is let them bring it up, and let them end the conversation. If you are unsure, ask your kids whether they want to talk about the game, and honor their feelings and their position on this issue. There is nothing, aside from the unacceptable behavior mentioned above, that cannot be discussed at a later time. The best part is, you will likely have a far better conversation about it hours after a game, instead of minutes.

As many youth sports are entering the season of playoffs and state championships, emotions are higher than ever, stress and pressure are more prevalent, and it is crucial that you let the Ride Home belong to your son or daughter. They will thank you for it one day, that I promise.