Effective Strategies for Communicating with Parents in Sport

Pete Van Mullem & Mike Cole

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The title of coach immediately places responsibility upon the coach to fulfill a variety of roles, including teacher, counselor, colleague, mentor, supervisor, and leader (Martens, 2012). Within each role, the coach is challenged to effectively communicate with student-athletes, other coaches, administrators, and parents. Coaches frequently discover that parents are the most contentious and often present one of the greatest challenges to developing and leading their team (Brown, 2003). Therefore, coaches must find a way to effectively communicate with parents in sport.

By Pete Van Mullem and Mike Cole

Effective Strategies for Communicating with Parents in Sport
Through years of practical experience and a review of literature on coaching education (Carter & Bloom, 2009; Erickson, Bruner, MacDonald, & Cote, 2008; Hardman & Jones, 2011; Jones, 2006; Jones, Potrac, Cushion, & Ronglan, 2011; Lyle & Cushion, 2010; Simon, 2013; Smoll, Cumming, & Smith, 2011), the authors have identified the following seven types of parents in interscholastic sport: 1) performance-focused, 2) emotionally driven, 3) seasoned veteran, 4) financial influencer, 5) verbal abuser, 6) submissive bystander, and 7) clock watcher. To better prepare coaches to effectively communicate with parents, this article describes the seven types of parents with whom coaches commonly communicate in sport. The article also provides key characteristics to assist coaches in identifying these types of parents and recommends strategies to assist coaches in effectively communicating with parents.

Types of Parents

**Performance-focused**

The United States is considered to be a results-oriented society that measures success by the attainment of money, winning, and personal achievement (Simon, 2013). Sport often mimics the cultural values of society. Thus, the values and actions of those associated with sport are driven by societal values (Eitzen & Sage, 2009). The performance-focused parent is seeking results to justify their son or daughter’s involvement in sport (Hyman, 2009), and as a product of a results-oriented culture, they often view their son or daughter’s participation in sport as a means to achieve success in the form of winning, personal achievement, or a college scholarship (Smoll et al., 2011). Typically, a performance-focused parent is a former athlete with a driven personality. They understand what it takes to be successful based on societal values, and they judge their personal and professional lives on their ability to meet societal standards. To identify a performance-focused parent, look for parents who:

- watch practices and off-season workouts and often compare the performance of the participants;
- organize club teams and take them to competitions and tournaments;
- spend time training their son or daughter;
- monitor their son or daughter’s statistical performance;
- talk with their son or daughter immediately following competition; and
- occasionally criticize other players by making comments such as, “Joe should be rebounding like Sam” or “Sally sure makes a lot of mistakes at her position.”

To effectively communicate with performance-focused parents, work on keeping them involved from a distance. In other words, be cautious in allowing performance-focused parents to get too close, as it will be difficult for them to distinguish between what is good for the team and what is in the best interest of their child. Tell the parent that the enthusiasm and commitment they demonstrate in helping their child could be beneficial for the entire team. Encourage them to include other team members in individualized workouts and activities they organize to increase the value of the athletic sport experience for everyone involved (Smoll et al., 2011). Express to them that if the entire team improves, the experience for their child will also improve.

**Emotionally driven**

The dedication and commitment that student-athletes and coaches demonstrate toward their sport often generate a strong emotional attachment to the activity, making it challenging for student-athletes and coaches to manage their emotions (Potrac & Marshall, 2011). Parents who get easily caught up in the excitement surrounding their son or daughter’s sport experience may also develop an emotional attachment to the activity (Hyman, 2009). Often, the more connected a parent is emotionally to the activity, the more in sync they become with their child’s emotions surrounding their sport experience. If the child experiences elation, then the parent will feel elation (Kriegel, 2007). Conversely, if a child has a poor performance, the parent may become depressed. These changes in mood can be momentary or can last the entire season, and they often negatively impact the child and possibly the entire team.

One method for recognizing an emotionally driven parent is to observe how they react after a competition:

- Do they smile after a win and pout after a loss?
• How do they interact with other parents in social settings? For example, do they keep their distance at team functions (e.g., postseason awards banquet, pregame gatherings, fundraisers, and road games) when their child is unhappy?
• Do they seem more engaged in team functions when their child is happy?

Additionally, when coaches teach siblings from the same family, the emotionally driven parent will often react to situations based on the emotional state of the child currently playing, regardless of the experiences of their previous son or daughter who participated in the past.

Coaches are in a unique position to address parental concerns and enhance student-athletes’ overall experience in sport (Smoll et al., 2011). To effectively communicate with the emotionally driven parent, consider working directly with the student-athlete. Teach the student-athlete how to deal with losing and winning in a positive way (Martens, 2012). If the student-athlete is able to manage their emotions, a parent may be more likely to temper their excitement and frustrations, even if it is at odds with their personality (Potrac & Marshall, 2011). Another approach is to educate parents early in the season, preferably during a parent meeting, about up-and-coming trials and tribulations associated with playing competitive athletics. Let them know that sport provides a wonderful learning opportunity and that they should look for ways to help their child learn from the experience (Brown, 2003).

**Seasoned veteran**

Previous experience as a student-athlete is often a prerequisite for becoming a coach (Erickson et al., 2008), and typically, coaches will draw on their experiences as a student-athlete for ideas and coaching techniques (Carter & Bloom, 2009). A parent with an athletic background also uses previous experiences in sport to understand and react to their child’s participation in sport. How the parent communicates with their son or daughter’s coach may be influenced by their previous sport experience (e.g., success, skill level, length of career, and interactions with previous coaches) and how many of their children are current or previous sport participants.

To identify a seasoned-veteran parent, notice whether the parent:

• seems to be living through the experience and achievement of the child;
• hopes their child reaches their level of success as an athlete or makes up for their own lack of athletic accomplishments (Martens, 2001; Smoll et al., 2011); or
• demonstrates knowledge of the game and offers insight that could be helpful.

To effectively communicate with the seasoned-veteran parent, form a relationship with the parent and establish mutual trust based on the team’s development, not just their child’s performance (Ronglan & Havang, 2011). Although they may struggle to separate themselves from their child, if the parent competed at a high level of sport, he or she may legitimately have an understanding of sport and the experience their child is going through. Because the seasoned-veteran parent may be able to provide valuable insight (Dorfman, 2003), listen to them and avoid getting defensive regarding their suggestions and comments (Smoll et al., 2011). Continue to keep an open line of communication with them, as long as the conversation focuses on what is best for the team.

**Financial influencer**

In sport, decisions regarding sport selection, participation opportunities, and availability of sport facilities are often driven by a student-athlete’s socioeconomic status (Coakley, 2009). As state funding for sports at the interscholastic level continues to decrease (Blackburn, Forsyth, Olson, & Whitehead, 2013), the role of the parents in providing financial assistance for sport participation and opportunities (e.g., club sports, private training sessions, and access to private facilities) continues to increase (Popke, 2007). Although a student-athlete’s experience may be limited by their parents’ disposable income, it may also be greatly enhanced by a parent’s ability to provide additional training sessions and the use of advanced training facilities. Parents who are financial influencers are often from a higher socioeconomic status and:

• utilize their financial status to increase opportunities for their child;
• are well known in the community and/or have a business that is highly involved with local athletic teams;
• tend to view success in sport only in terms of victories and financial profit (e.g., college scholarships, increased sponsorship opportunities, sold-out arenas; Torres & Hager, 2013); and
• openly flaunt an endless supply of money by enrolling their child in specialized training programs, paying for off-season tournament entry fees, and offering to purchase team equipment.

Their financial status and ability to buy experiences for their child may give them a strong influence over the coach and other parents, thereby making it easy to appreciate and accept monetary support. However, the coach must be cautious in how they interact with and accept monetary support from a parent willing to contribute, as this scenario can place undue pressure on the coach to provide additional opportunities for the financial influencer’s child. In business, a common practice is to expect something in return for monetary support (Gulati, 2012). In the context of a child’s sport experience, the expected return is often increased playing time. This becomes a dangerous situation for the coach and could possibly risk their cred-
ibility and effectiveness in leading their team (Janssen & Dale, 2006).

Furthermore, money will almost always drive the financial influencer's decision making and often becomes their first choice when solving a problem. Accustomed to getting their way, the financial influencer will often blame the coach when the situation is out of their control (Martens, 2001). The challenge for a coach is to balance the financial influencer’s desire to be close to the team with the coach’s need to seek additional funding for their program. Try to create distance from this type of parent and avoid accepting offers or favors even though it may help the team. Form a parent group (e.g., booster club) to dissipate the conflict of interest and require all financial contributions to come from the group. Additionally, the parent group provides the coach with an opportunity to communicate directly with the parent(s), while using the group as a barrier to conversations involving fund-raising and financial support.

**Verbal abuser**

In the coach–athlete relationship, a coach uses words to motivate and create action (Martens, 2012), and the tone of the message delivered can often have a lasting positive or negative effect (Hamilton, 2013). A coach who engages in verbal abuse of student-athletes creates a negative culture, which often drives kids away from sport (Hyman, 2009). Surprisingly, this applies to parents as well. A parent who is openly vocal and speaks their mind may generate a negative environment at sporting events that affects spectators, coaches, participants, and officials (Dorfman, 2003).

To identify the verbally abusive parent, listen during a game or competitive event. This type of parent:

- is often the most vocal and demonstrates a controlling and dominant personality;
- is not afraid to speak his or her mind;
- relishes the opportunity to be heard, as they often shout negative thoughts during competition and share demeaning information about players;
- often sits by him or herself at sporting events; and
- quickly goes to their son or daughter after a game to relive moments from the recently completed competition.

The verbally abusive parent will rarely have the coach's or team's best interest in mind. Therefore, to effectively communicate with this type of parent, the coach should increase communication with the student-athlete and develop a stronger coach–athlete relationship. If the coach builds a stronger bond with the student-athlete, the student-athlete will have a better understanding of the coach's decisions regarding their athletic experience (Jones & Bailey, 2011). Ideally, positive interaction with a coach will be communicated by the student-athlete to the parents, thereby possibly mollering the parents' abusive behavior.

**Submissive bystander**

Participation in athletics provides student-athletes with a place to develop autonomy and grow socially through interactions with peers, parents, and coaches (Torres & Hager, 2013). Thus, one of the greatest challenges for parents in sport is the relinquishment of control by giving their child to the game and entrusting the coach to provide positive guidance (Brown, 2003). Although not necessarily intentional, the submissive-bystander parent has released their child to the game and the coach.

To identify the submissive-bystander parent, reflect on the parents who interact the least with the coach and team. The submissive-bystander parent will often avoid interaction with the coach for one of the following reasons:

- They believe that competitive sport can provide positive values and experiences; thus, they release their child to the game and entrust the coach as a leader, sometimes blindly believing all coaches have their child’s best interest at heart (Brown, 2003).
- They have little or no experience with competitive sport as a participant or with older siblings. This lack of familiarity with sport may make them uncomfortable when interacting with coaches and other parents.

To effectively communicate with the submissive-bystander parent, find avenues to generate conversation. Seek opportunities to connect and get to know them better and acknowledge them by complimenting their child, if applicable. When they know they are appreciated, submissive-bystander parents will likely support the coach and be less likely to question coaching tactics if approached by other parents (Martens, 2001). Ideally, a coach wants a parent to stay in the submissive-bystander role, because too much interaction and encouragement to become involved may lead to a heightened sense of their role as a parent and to them becoming more involved than needed or beyond their abilities to be helpful.

**Clock watcher**

Managing playing time among student-athletes can be one of the more difficult challenges that a coach faces. Coupled with ongoing pressure from parents lobbying for more playing time for their child (Torres & Hager, 2013), parent and coach disagreements are often a result of a difference in opinion about the child's athletic talents and abilities (Martens, 2001). Although much of coaching is subjective (Dorfman, 2003), the clock provides an objective means for a parent to evaluate their child's playing time. Therefore, regardless of the parent's ability to judge talent, the clock-watcher parent uses the clock to assess their child's participation and experience in sport.

To identify the clock-watcher parent, have an assistant coach or a trustworthy friend scan the crowd and make note.
of parents documenting their child’s playing time. This type of parent:

- typically is not shy about letting others know they are watching the clock, because it does not reflect on their ability to judge talent;
- considers the status of being a starter to be important; and
- may confront the coach regarding playing time, while often comparing their child to a starting player.

To effectively communicate with the clock-watcher parent, utilize a preseason parent meeting to establish the expectations and standards for parents to communicate with the coach (Martens, 2001). Get the message across to all parents that as the level of competition increases, arguably, a coach is less obligated to evenly distribute playing time (Kretchmar, 2013). Explain that playing time cannot be guaranteed but is something that is earned based on a number of subjective factors (e.g., hard work, skill mastery, and character) and objective measures (e.g., statistics, punctuality, and attendance).

Conclusion

A positive relationship with a coach, coupled with effective communication between the coach and parents, can provide student-athletes with a healthy environment to grow and develop (Vella, Oades, & Crowe, 2010). The coach, entrusted by parents to lead and guide their son or daughter’s sport experiences, must be able to identify the different types of parents in sport and communicate effectively with each of them. By identifying the types of parents discussed in this article and implementing the communication strategies suggested, coaches will be better able to fulfill their role as a leader in sport and create a positive sport experience for student-athletes both on the field and at home.

References


