

On the Firing Line (Twenty-first in a series)

Coach-Dad-Itis

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“When helping hurts.”

When a parent becomes their child's coach, officially or unofficially, it often can be very beneficial and enjoyable to both coach and athlete. There are situations, however, where the arrangement is damaging to the relationship and to the athlete's development. Sadly, this latter state is all too common. One of my students (one among many students who suffer from varying levels of difficulty with a parent coach) suggested this topic and even gave the “condition” a name: Coach-Dad-Itis. When I asked her to elaborate on her suggestion, she sent me almost an entire article on the topic! Having obtained permission to do so, her thoughts are now shared with you here.

Symptoms

- Athlete is often (but not always) female.
- Parent coach is often (but not always) male.
- Overactive tear ducts after exposure to sporting equipment.
- Common feelings of self-doubt and lack of confidence.
- A parent often with their child's best interests in mind.

Coach-Dad-Itis is what often happens when dad decides he wants to coach his daughter. Whether it is to promote a closer father daughter relationship, or he believes he is qualified to be a top notch coach to his little girl, or both, it can have negative effects on her enjoyment and growth if not done properly. It often happens when dad and daughter's relationship begins to revolve solely around the sport. Raised voices and tears are a common symptom.

This is a serious mental disorder that has negatively affected countless female shooters. While sort of poking fun at it, this condition is quite serious. It can squash not only a girl's potential in her sport but also her self-confidence and her relationship with her father.

As a shooter who has lived through this myself, and who still suffers from it occasionally, I have come to realize that all the while my father had the absolute best intentions. His little girl wanted to be a state, national, potentially an Olympic champion – and he would do everything that is honest and within his power to get her there.

What the athlete needs to understand:

- You are your father's flesh and blood – he will always love you.
- Your father pushes because he feels it is what is best for you.
- If your father yells when you cry about your shooting, most often it is because he feels helpless because he doesn't know what to do to stop the tears.
- If you still feel like Coach Dad's love is conditional after taking these things into consideration (it isn't, it just feels like it is), think about someone whose love isn't. When things have been rough with Coach Dad, I have been known to train or compete with a picture of my dog on my stand... she really could care less how I do!

What Coach Dad needs to understand:

- Girls are very emotional as preteens and teenagers – they don't know why they are crying either.
- She loves you very much and only wants you to be proud of her... even if she says otherwise.
- Young athletes often internalize their results. They become a measure of their self worth. Yelling about a bad set or for a thrown shot hits them to the core. Instead, try calmly talking it over after everything is said and done. Right after the competition is not a good time. Over a meal the next morning or afternoon is.
- Yelling at your athlete can often have adverse effects (like a slump in scores or quitting the sport altogether) and cause more tears. Yelling is almost never a good idea.

Cures

Although I'm not sure there is a perfect cure for this, and I'm sure every father/daughter relationship is different, here are some things you might try if Coach-Dad-Itis strikes.

- Get mom and siblings involved... make it about the family... not just about dad and daughter.
- Find something in common other than shooting. Do that together as well so daughter doesn't feel like the relationship rides on her scores.
- If opinions and feelings cannot be expressed face to face without raised voices or tears – write letters! You can think about what you are saying so communication is often better that way.
- It may help for daughter do address dad as “Coach” on the range or whenever the sport is being discussed. It makes the relationship on the range less personal and that man that's yelling at her is not dad but coach.

This was written from her perspective as a female athlete with her father as parent coach. Keep in mind that any combination of male or female parent with male or female child can suffer from this “condition.” It has been observed beyond sport as well; music is a classic example.

When granting permission to use her writing, she also added: “What I wrote is in part exaggeration for the purpose of humor. I have also gathered some of this from others while talking about their experiences. Not all of these things describe my relationship with my father. Please also add that I believe that I wouldn't have come as far as I have without having my dad as a coach. I just want others to be aware of some of the difficulties in having dad as a coach and the way to work through these difficulties without having to go through the performance anxiety that can result from this.” She is wise beyond her years!

Oh, and Dad, if you think you know who the student is that suggested this topic, I have two thoughts for you. 1) Your guess is wrong; it isn't her. 2) The fact that you thought it was her means that, without mentioning it to her in any way, you need to give some very serious thought to this topic – right away.

We have all heard of, and often seen, the “little league dad”, or the “soccer mom” who is over the top, yelling at coaches, officials, other athletes, and their own child, pushing their child to win, and who shows more concern about winning than in enjoyment, learning, growth, and sportsmanship. This is demeaning to the child and the parent's overzealousness often causes the child to leave the sport entirely. Even parents who are much more reserved can have similarly

negative effects on their child. Most of these parents are not coaches, but the effects are similar to Coach-Dad-Itis.

Most parents who are guilty of Coach-Dad/Mom-Itis are not aware of it and vehemently deny it... after all, they are “just trying to help” little Johnnie or Susie. It is a sad paradox that, even with top athletes and Olympic hopefuls, one of the hardest jobs of the coach is dealing with a small segment of the parents. Luckily, most parents are supportive in positive ways and many invest a great deal of time, effort, and money in assisting or running grassroots programs.

Athletes, even at top levels in their sport, need to focus on learning, enjoyment, and the thrill of competition. If allowed to do so, winning will take care of itself.

If you or someone you know is having a problem with Coach-Dad-Itis, there are additional resources that will help with numerous specific techniques for handling the issues of the frustrated athlete.

In her book *Sports Her Way*, Susan Wilson addresses many aspects of coaching female athletes, including how male and female athletes differ and how the coach can plan and act accordingly. She also specifically addresses the parent coach situation with a number of excellent suggestions.

The American Sport Education Program (ASEP) has a number of excellent resources. Start with their book *SportParent*. This book is short, easy to read, and full of great ideas for the coach parent. Some coaches make parental participation in a *SportParent* class a prerequisite to accepting their child for private coaching or as part of the coach’s program. The class includes a presenter’s guide, video, and parent’s summary cards.

All coaches should take the ASEP *Coaching Principles* course. It is now available online for those who cannot arrange their schedule to take the classroom course. This course has one underlying principle: “Athletes First”. The very best coaches, regardless of level, “walk the walk” in this regard. It is sometimes a challenge to do so, but in the long run it is always rewarding for coach and athlete alike. ASEP offers a number of excellent courses and certification programs for coaches.

Young female athletes are motivated by love. They want to feel a sense of accomplishment and self-worth. They want to feel that their parents, coaches, and teammates are supportive of them in ways that are positive and helpful. Actions speak magnitudes louder than mere words in this regard. Yes, they do often break out in tears – even they don’t always understand why. Ultimate performance in sport reaches deep within the person and even grown men feel emotions welling up that rarely surface otherwise.

Regardless of their gender, treating athletes with dignity and respect, placing an emphasis on their development over winning the next event, and allowing them a significant decision-making role in their sport participation will go a long way in helping the child mature and in cementing positive relationships among child, parent, and coach – especially when parent is also coach. Enjoy!

References & Resources

- Wilson, Susan, *Sports Her Way: Motivating Girls to Start and Stay with Sports*, Fireside, New York, 2000, ISBN 0-684-86512-2 – Available through local or online booksellers or electronically at <http://www.simonsays.com/content/content.cfm?sid=33&pid=479748>
- ASEP, *SportParent*, Human Kinetics, Champaign, IL, 1994, ISBN 0-87322-696-8 – <http://www.humankinetics.com/products/showproduct.cfm?isbn=0873226968>

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- American Sports Education Program (ASEP) – <http://www.asep.com/>

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Based in the Atlanta, Ga., area, JP O’Connor (jpoc@acm.org and <http://www.america.net/~jpoc/>) is involved in rifle and pistol target shooting as a competitor, is a former Assistant National Coach – USA Paralympics Shooting Team, is a Level 3 coach, serves on the National Coach Development Staff, and coaches the rifle and pistol teams at North Georgia College & State University. He enjoys working with a number of pistol and rifle athletes from around the country, ranging from beginners to the highly advanced, in clinics and one-on-one private coaching, all on a volunteer basis. He also works with musicians and athletes in a variety of sports.

(Biographical information as of October 2009)