

The Sports Doctor: Parents, here's how to raise an elite athlete

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Being a parent is one of life's great joys. It's also one of life's great challenges. Add in the world of sports with all its "stuff" and here we go!

Over the years, I've got to say that the vast majority of parents handle very well all that goes with balancing all aspects of youth sports.

Of course, when children are young, and "everybody plays," sports fit in quite comfortably with everything else. As kids get older, maybe middle school and above, the pressure's on everyone — parents, the kids and the whole family. When we're talking parenting the young "serious athlete," then things can mount into "serious" problems.

Naperville family psychologist and psychiatrist Dr. Marty Kraus of Naperville Family counseling — frequent guest on "The Sports Doctor" radio show — believes the whole family is involved in endless ways in developing the young athlete.

"Relationships between the young athlete and his or her parents, between siblings, between the youngster and coach are all important," Kraus said. "We are in a sports culture where almost anything goes, and the pressure on these elite kids can be overwhelming."

Pushing kids too far, too fast or too aggressively often leads to injuries, and all sorts of potential problems. Most injuries are overuse — just too much pressure on young growing bodies. Go to sportsdoctorradio.com for numerous articles on foot and lower extremity overuse injuries. Many times we are talking pre-adolescents who already are playing their sport every day, almost year round.

The late, great Dr. Jim Vicory, who shared The Sports Doctor radio show with me in the mid-1980s and early 1990s was a prominent sports psychologist. He had some excellent general rules for parents of young athletes.

1. Don't be a critic, analyzing all the details of your child's performance.
2. Pay attention to what they did well.
3. Always use encouragement.
4. Don't be afraid to speak to coaches "respectfully" about questions you have or problems your youngster has.

Vicory often spoke about overzealous parents and the pressures they would put on kids, let alone their often outlandish behavior. Kraus often asks, whose goal is it? The young athletes or his or her mom or dad? Trying to make the team, trying to excel, maybe a college scholarship or beyond — all of these are potential pressure cookers. Remember, sports are supposed to be fun.

Here are some examples of answers to questions I posed to the moms of two great Naperville athletes on past Sports Doctor radio shows. The question: How did you know you weren't pushing too far, too fast, in your young superstar's quest to be the best? How did you know that the "dreams/goals" were theirs, not yours?

Tanya Lysacek, mother of Olympic gold medal men's champion figure skater Evan Lysacek: "When Evan was a youngster, he often had ice time very early, 6, 6:30 a.m. I never had to wake him up — there he was, with his hat and gloves, ready to go. I knew he had the fire." (You can hear her interview at sportsdoctorradio.com, radio shows, March 11.)

Janice Lumpkin, mother of four-time Illinois State tennis champion Elizabeth Lumpkin: "Liz's father and I played tennis, and Liz was always hitting balls against the garage even as a 5 (and) 6 year old. As she developed into a great player, I made it very clear to her: it's your goal, we loved you before you picked up the tennis racquet, and we'll love you if you put it down ... it's up to you."

These are two great examples of proper perspective in dealing with potential young champions.

Both Vicory and Kraus talked about the importance of "the mental side of sports": how it's important to train your mind as well as your body; that you don't need "something's wrong or problems" to benefit from sports psychology. I agree, the whole family is involved in the development of the child athlete.

For more information about sports psychology or enhancing performance, contact Kraus at NapervilleFamilycounseling.com or call 30-527-1631.

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