

# Dad, Are You Making an Idol of Your Child's Success?

I don't think anyone could have gotten through to me that as I was inexplicably living my life through my son Robby's athletic accomplishments. His successes created for me gratifying chemical hits of exhilaration and his failures caused varying degrees of personal frustration and dejection.

You see, I coached Robby's basketball and baseball teams starting when he was in kindergarten and essentially continued through the eighth grade. I initially wanted to do this because I thought this would give him every opportunity to enjoy the experiences and to find whatever degree of success he was capable of. Along the way I found that I really enjoyed teaching the boys and was thoughtful and enthusiastic in my preparation. I believe I was a suitable educator in the fundamentals and most aspects of appropriate participation. I had very intentionally fostered a close relationship with Robby from the time he was very young, so being his official coach seemed like an appropriate transition. Apart from my formal coaching duties, he and I spent countless hours in "active play," which was predominantly all manner of sports. It seemed we participated in something just about every day. When I would get home from work, I would change clothes, and we would head outside. When the weather was bad, I had appropriate indoor paraphernalia. During those early years I was dad, playmate, best friend and hero all rolled into one.

Those were, without a doubt, some of the most meaningful, carefree and enjoyable times of my life. However, something disheartening began taking place within me somewhere along the way that I certainly did not anticipate. I guess it must have been somewhere around his fifth-grade year that he began distancing himself athletically from most of his friends. He was making significant progress in his sports, specific skills

as well as general athletic abilities. This was likely in part as a result of our countless hours of participating in some type of skill-producing activities from early on. It was also around that same time that he began being invited to play on traveling teams. And it was also about this time that a displeasing pride begun rising up in me. As best I can tell, it stemmed from a faulty foundation of my own personal sports dissatisfactions and dreams. During Robby's middle school years, as he progressed into one of the leading young athletes in our community, regrettably, my self-importance swelled accordingly.

When he would experience high-level successes, I would experience a graceless emotional exhilaration, and when he did not do as well, it would affect me accordingly; the higher the level of competition, the more dramatic the positive and negative hits. And sadly, it was the same with my fluctuating reactions to Robby personally. Inadvertently, I began putting expectations on him in various ways surrounding his athletic achievements, again not recognizing the subtle changes taking place with him. I'm convinced this immature attitude of mine affected his ability to enjoy these experiences as well as creating a bit of a subtle distancing in our level of closeness. I was clandestinely engaging in not only high school sports fantasies regarding my son, but college sports as well, specifically baseball.

Looking back, I'm not sure that I ever really just simply enjoyed a season or even a single game, in and of itself. I must sadly admit that I was always thinking to some degree about how this situation would contribute to the future athletic fantasies for "us." I missed so many "in the moment" enjoyable situations because to me, they were simply building blocks. By the time he was in the eighth grade, he was being talked about in the same breath as the young man from our community who was the high school's first-team All-State shortstop. I was told by men whom I believed should know such

things that Robby was probably the best baseball player his age in the state. And the high school varsity baseball coach where he was to attend the next year, told me he had him penciled in for the starting second-base position on the varsity for his upcoming freshman year, pretty heady stuff for a frustrated former athlete. "I" was finally "on my way"!

Disappointingly, as I was soon to discover, Robby had other secret flights of imagination. The summer break, prior to his freshman year, he disclosed to me that he no longer wanted to participate in sports of any sort. I was absolutely devastated. As I reflect, it seems obvious that I had contributed mightily to a burn-out situation with my son. I had unknowingly pushed him, expecting too much out of him, and he was no longer having any fun. I tried to reason with him, encourage him, manipulate him, entice him and everything else I thought possibly beneficial for my quandary, but to no avail. I considered ordering him to participate. Even to this day, I sometimes wonder if I had demanded that he play at least one year, if something might have taken place that may have sparked something more permanent. I suppose at the time, it just seemed the right thing to do to allow him make his own decision. I can only presume the manner in which I had been approaching him and the tremendous expectations he felt created negative and unnecessary pressures, leading to an aversion to those things causing this anxiety.

Why am I writing about all this now? Because I hear about and observe so many parents who unintentionally place this type of pressure on their beloved offspring to perform to unreasonable expectations, many times for their own personal validation. I know none of us want to admit it, but it is often such an obvious situation to most every other person around, however none of them will tell you because it would be much too awkward. And your son or daughter may very well already feel the pressure which they could someday surrender to and retreat in a completely different direction, moving away from the

pressure whether it is actually best with their specific gifts and abilities or not.

In his freshman year, Robby quit all athletic endeavors, became a Goth and started participating in all sorts of behaviors which completely freaked me out. As would be befitting of my immaturity at that stage, I “paid him back” by distancing myself from him and having little availability for a necessary restructuring in our relationship. Very sadly, aspects of this irresponsibility lasted for the entirety of his high school tenure. Our relationship became sadly distant, and then three months after he graduated, Robby drowned in a boating accident. One week before beginning classes at the local community college, he went with several of his friends to a high mountain lake a couple of hours from our home, for a three-day weekend. Somewhere around midnight, he and one of his buddies grabbed a canoe and paddled out into the middle of the lake to look at the stars ... with no lifejackets. A strong gust of wind came up, and the canoe tipped over. They struggled for some time to get it upright but were ultimately unsuccessful. His friend, who was a very good swimmer, decided to swim to shore for help. A little over an hour later with help arriving, my son’s body could no longer be located. In fact, it was not discovered for another two years. It’s my understanding that after that two-year period of time, two other young people had experienced a similar fate and the authorities decided to bring in sonar equipment to locate the bodies.

As you can probably imagine, the mistakes I made as his dad feel compounded by the shortness of our time together and the distance I placed between us the last years of his life. Realistically, if Robby had continued his athletic endeavors, was there a reasonable chance he was going to be a professional baseball player, even if I had done things correctly? Extremely unlikely. How about a college baseball scholarship? I have no idea, and as you would probably

imagine, it now makes no difference to me. I had a small window to appropriately enjoy a remarkable and precious young man, and in my estimation, I did a very disappointing job in doing so. Oh, I know, things could have been much worse; but for my world and perspective, I would give anything to start there at kindergarten T-ball and enjoy to the utmost those specific days with no hint of impending self-centered motives.

My friends, you do not know what season will be your last with those most precious to you. I know we hear sometimes that we should live each day as if it was our last, but how often do we really take that seriously? For those of you who have children, I especially want to encourage you to live the season you are in with all the passion you can and enjoy it for what it is, not for what you wish it could be or where you think it may take you. My "Little League dad" experience taught me so much, and now, as I watch as numerous Little League parents do such similar things with their children, it genuinely saddens me.

None of the athletes I coached over that nine-year period ever became successful professional athletes, yet the way so many of their parents carried on, it certainly seemed that was their expectation. Examine your attitudes, perspective and behaviors; think about how and why you respond as you do; learn from those of us who made those precise mistakes in previous generations. Genuinely and intentionally enjoy those you love, one day at a time, one event at a time: "This is the day that the Lord has made" (Psalm 118:24a). Nothing more is promised and nothing more should be presumed. {eoa}

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