

When Parents Cross the Line

By [Craig Smith](#)
Seattle Times staff reporter

Trouble often follows for athletes and coaches when over-involved parents cross the line from encouragement to interference.

Release your kids to the game.

KIRKLAND — When someone asks lecturer Bruce Brown where he got all his insight into issues of adolescent sports, he has a five-word answer:

"It's stuff kids told me."

And he listened carefully during a 30-plus-year career as a coach of boys and girls in a variety of sports.

After every sports season, he asked players to talk about what they had liked most and least. Over the years, he kept hearing more and more stories of parental over-involvement.

Brown said "red flags" that a parent is too involved are:

- 1) Parents who share the credit for their child's accomplishments
- 2) Parents who continue to coach after the athlete knows more about the sport than the parent
- 3) An athlete who avoids a parent after a game
- 4) When the game's outcome means more to a parent than to the athlete
- 5) Parents who try to solve problems best left to the team and players.

Brown encourages parents to ask their sons or daughters these questions before a season starts:

- 1) Why are you playing?
- 2) What is a successful season?
- 3) What goals do you have?
- 4) What do you think your role will be on the team?

He encourages parents to ask themselves the same questions, plus this one: "What do you as a parent hope they gain from the experience?"

"If your answers are different from theirs, you need to drop yours and accept theirs," he said.

For example, if an athlete is playing basketball because she likes the sport and enjoys being part of the team, trouble is inevitable if the parents' chief objective is to win a college scholarship.

One of Brown's bedrock messages is that parents must realize that athletes need "time and space" after a game.

"And the more emotional the game was, the more time and space they need," he said.

He said youngsters told him they dreaded "the ride home" after a game because a parent, usually the father, would critique the game and their performance.

Brown said he found one high-school boy in the team locker room nearly two hours after a basketball game had ended.

"I never go home until my father goes to sleep," the boy said.

Brown said he hates to hear a kid say, "I don't want my parents at the game" because the youngster "really wants them there in the worst way" but has concerns about behavior during or after the game.

The coach-parent relationship can be a delicate one, and Brown said there are "appropriate" and "inappropriate" subjects for parents to discuss with coaches.

Appropriate ones are mental and physical treatment of the child, ways to help the child improve and any concerns about the athlete's behavior.

The inappropriate subjects are playing time, strategy and other team members.

As a coach, Brown said he had one commandment for his players: "Don't let your teammates down."

That meant everything from don't loaf at practice to don't do dumb things off the field that could get you suspended.

Brown is quick to remind everyone — players, parents and athletes — that the only guarantee in a sport season is that "it won't be perfect."

"Even if there aren't problems among player, parents and coach, there are going to be problems with relationships on the team, problems with playing time and problems with individual and team success," he said.

Brown often is asked whether athletes have changed much during his career. His answer: "very little, but the parents have changed dramatically."