

Are You Hurting Your Daughter's Scholarship Chances?

Journalists use what they call “the lead,” which is the first few sentences of an article, to draw people into that story. It gives the reader a tease so they’ll go on, but on this subject, there can be no pause.

Are parents hurting their athlete’s chances for a scholarship?

“I have specifically not recruited players because her parents were far too involved; ‘Helicoptering!’ If you are not sure about your level of involvement, ask the coach your daughter is playing for, but be sure you are prepared for the answer!” This piece of advice is from University of Arizona head volleyball coach David Rubio, and he is not alone on the subject.

Coaches from every level of our sport, and in ALL sports, are under siege from over involved parents. Many of these parents don’t realize what they are doing and feel they are just taking care of their children, but as you will see, these ‘helicopter’ parents are doing the polar opposite they work so hard to avoid; taking opportunities away from their athletes!

Defining the Helicopter/ Velcro Parent

The last decade has seen the creation and increased use of the term helicopter parent or to an even greater length, now Velcro parents: it’s the vogue phraseology to describe parents that go far beyond the notion of being involved when it comes to their children.

Wikipedia defines a helicopter parent as, “...a parent who pays extremely close attention to his or her child’s experiences and problems. These parents rush to prevent any harm or failure from befalling their children and won’t let them learn from their own mistakes, sometimes even contrary to the children’s wishes. They are so named because, like helicopters, they hover closely overhead, rarely out of reach of their child.”

“In today’s society parents seem compelled to micro-manage their child, or worse, the environment that they participate in. Parents do not seem to understand that in most cases they are actually doing more harm than good.” says Coach Rubio. “Parents are misguided in their zeal to make sure their child has a positive experience. They rationalize their behavior by making statements that they know what is best for their child. Or, worse yet they don’t realize that they are being ‘helicopter parents.’”

Rubio’s memories of growing up and playing youth sports were far different. “I remember the words my father said to me before I embarked on my youth sports career. ‘Dave, I will be there in the stands to support you, but if you have a problem with the coach or players about anything, it is up to you to solve them. I am not going to interfere or question coaching decisions’. My father made it perfectly clear to me that this was my responsibility. I never knew how he felt when I didn’t play or when I did play. He also taught me another lesson that strongly resonates to me today. He said ‘you will finish what you started’. At the time I never gave it much thought. But, today, 35 years later, I have a thorough understanding what his message was.”

Critics point to an undefined but palpable “self esteem” push into this generation’s education. John Keilman, a writer for the Chicago Tribune says, “This is a generation of teens for whom praise has often come as readily as oxygen. They’ve been bathed from the cradle in affirmations and awards meant to boost their self esteem and their prospects in life. But some who research the psychology of teens have concluded that this trend, born of good intentions in the Age of Aquarius, has had toxic effects. By their estimation, today’s young people have been praised so much that some flail at their first taste of criticism or failure. Others develop a keen sense of privilege; believing they’ll coast into a golden future regardless of their actual talents, accomplishments or willingness to work.”

From the mid-90's to today, helicopter parents has become a social phenomenon warranting oodles of books, psychology courses and magazine articles and the not-to-be-outdone anti helicopter movement with its books, magazines and websites closely following behind.

How bad has it become?

- In order to separate doting parents from their freshman sons, Morehouse College in Atlanta has instituted a formal “parting ceremony.”
- A retail manager was stunned when interviewing prospects for Christmas time help last year, a mother came into the interview room with her daughter and asked for a chair.
- A mom called her son's university because he couldn't find the classroom where his class was being held and blamed the university because signs for classes weren't posted on the doors even though the classroom was clearly listed on the student's schedule.

Sports have always been thought to be a great teacher of life lessons, experiences, highs and lows, successes and failures. Today, club sports, paid for and often administered by parents of athletes, have become a landing pad for so called “helicopter” parents.

Why Helicopter Parents Now?

First, let's look at some facts;

- Youth sports are a \$5 BILLION entity in the United States with little to no oversight.
- In 2009-10, 7.6 million athletes participated in high school sports in the United States with 403,985 girls playing high school volleyball and 50,467 playing boy's volleyball.
- In 2009-10, Arizona had 238 girl's high school volleyball programs that produced 6,922 players and on the boy's side, 1,519 played in 53 high schools state wide.

Pat Mooney, South Mountain Community College Head Volleyball Coach has been coaching for 14 years and has seen the phenomenon grow exponentially. “I have seen the level of parent involvement go from dropping their kids off at a tournament or practice and sitting in the stands cheering for the TEAM, to parents pacing the sideline in practice with a water bottle just in case their daughter looks as if she may be thirsty and need a drink in between reps.” Mooney adds, “It's even gone so far as parents approaching the sideline in between games to question coaches as to why their daughter isn't playing.”

“To me as well as to a lot of other coaches, that is quite disturbing in a sense that the main reason a lot of kids who now play club are looking at the golden ticket of a college scholarship at the end of the rainbow, instead of playing to improve their skills and that they genuinely enjoy it, and they want to be part of a TEAM. What's even more ironic is that these are usually the kids of parents who not only hurt their daughters' chances with their hovering recruiting, but also limit their kids' ability once they get to college as well.” Mooney emphasizes.

Lisa Stuck, Head Volleyball Coach at Glendale Community College sees it first hand. “The sacrifices club parents make in order for their kids to experience club sports are immeasurable. I understand the feelings that come with making those sacrifices and wanting something in return. However, it seems as though the investment has created a climate change. Positive support from the stands and the occasional team party has turned into over-involvement. Hard work, team first and learning to take responsibility have shifted to less work, me first and it's not my fault. Instead of encouraging players to honor a commitment, parents and players jump from club to club looking for greener grass”

Clubs and Parents- A Different Connection

One club director who wished to remain anonymous, pointed out the glut of clubs in Arizona is not an innocent bystander of parental over involvement when you consider recent history in the Region.

The Facts:

- In 2009-10, the Arizona Region registered 4,392 junior girls' players and 366 boys.
- Since 2000, the Region's junior registration has increased by 83%
- There were 42 clubs in the Arizona Region in 2000, 55 clubs in 2005 (an increase of 31%) and there were 88 clubs in 2010 (an increase from 10 years ago of 110 %!)

"It's not brain surgery to figure out why there are so many clubs. A kid tries out for a team but makes a 2's or a 3's team and mom and dad, KNOWING their daughter is much better than that, figures they can do it better and starts a club for their daughter." The director points out, "Mom and dad can't have their child fail, so they put the net under them again and again. The kid can't be on a 2's team if it's your parent's club or they're coaching."

In a recent interview, tennis Hall of Famer Martina Navratlova was asked what it was she had Champions needed, and said, "I think the ability to fail. Not being afraid to put it all on the line and come up short. Most people don't have that!"

Stuck points out, "Many parents inadvertently discourage the development of positive attributes by allowing their children to quit when things get difficult. Parents often communicate for their children, view playing time as the definition of success, and won't let their child make the mistakes necessary for growth. Rescuing players from their mistakes, justifying their behaviors, and not allowing them to stumble, cripples them in the long run as they are unable to cope with failure, unable to problem-solve, and struggle with taking responsibility for themselves when they get to college."

That is IF they get to college.

The Elusive Scholarship

Consider this data:

- A 2008 New York Times study showed that the yearly value of a volleyball scholarship was \$12,725
- A 2010 Houston Chronicle study listed the following numbers; 397,968 girls playing volleyball, 3,318 scholarships available, .8% chance of landing that scholarship. Less than 1%!

"When thinking of the question 'are club parents helping or hurting their kid's chances of playing volleyball in college by "helicoptering" over them?' I can answer with absolutely no hesitation and respond with a resounding YES!!"

Coach Mooney's statement above is from the disconnect he sees first hand, and uses in his evaluations of athletes in search of scholarship opportunities. "While I'm out recruiting and scouting as a college coach, if I see the 'I need my water bottle NOW' signal from a player on the bench to a parent in the stands, I drop that player to the last person on my list and have to think long and hard about actually keeping her on the list. That may sound trivial but these are usually the players whose parents will approach the coach to ask why their daughter didn't play while their daughter is in the stands texting her friends and then carry their daughter's gym bag and water bottle out to the car. I have to ask myself if that player can be responsible for her own equipment, work hard in practice, and seek out an instructor to ask a question or to turn in assignments missed for an away match or is this the player whose parents will call me if she is reprimanded for forgetting her uniform, is challenged to be her best at practice, or receives a low grade on an assignment because she wasn't allowed to turn in late work missed for a class."

“I know I should not have been surprised at the level of parental involvement, but I was!” Rubio says. “I spend most of my day dealing with parents, club coaches or the players themselves. Talking to and observing a parent is a big part of what I do when I go recruiting. Even with that background, I was taken aback with the parental involvement.”

Northern Arizona University Head Volleyball Coach Craig Choate is in his 19th year of coaching and has seen the tide turn. “It’s a madhouse for kids, parents and coaches alike. I have never met a parent that didn’t feel his or her daughter didn’t deserve a scholarship. It usually starts something like this, ‘my daughter is a very hard worker.’ Guess what, working hard is a given, show me something above the norm! Show me passing that ranks in the top one percent. Show me an extraordinary jump. Show me a side out machine and THEN we’ll talk about a scholarship that’s worth \$80-100,000 over a four year span. Parents, there are something like 450,000 kids playing high school volleyball every year. There are roughly 330 D1 schools looking to give out on average, three scholarships a year. According to the math, maybe 1,000 kids out of 450,000 will get one. Are you still sure she’s that good?”

With these scant recruiting odds working against them, parents will do what they can to ensure their athletes are seen, known and marketed.

The Recruiting Process

Stuck has resorted to bringing parental involvement into a process that used to be only about an athlete. “In recruiting, the first few questions often asked of club coaches are: How involved are the parents? Does the athlete communicate or do the parents communicate for the athlete? Have you had any issues with the parents? and Will I have any problems with the parents?”

Coach Choate wants to see parents involved, but at the proper time. “If kids would be happy playing at any level; D1, D2, NAIA or Junior College, they improve their chances for a scholarship greatly. The problem with many kids is they have it in their mind to play at a specific school, state, near a beach, where the school colors match their eyes, etc. Parents, why do I keep hearing that this is your daughter’s decision and you don’t even have any input? Didn’t you just spend a fortune on club and countless hours driving her to Timbuktu and back? You’d help her buy a car wouldn’t you? You have a right to be part of the decision. Help her!”

“It’s been a slow shift but one that is very apparent when the club player gets to college and the parent involvement becomes extremely limited.” Stuck notes. “No longer can parents call coaches to discuss their child’s academic or athletic issues. The responsibility lies with the athlete. Some athletes are prepared; most unfortunately are not. The same can be said for the parent’s of these athletes. It is a culture shock for parents who are used to being an integral part of their child’s athletic experience.”

Arizona State University Head Volleyball Coach Jason Watson tries to get parents to understand that there’s a time to let go. “Those that have spent the time providing the emotional and financial support to get their athlete on a college roster, also struggle with how hard it is for their kid to play in college. Just remember, college sports are not an entitlement. Not everyone has the same opportunities. Often your athlete calls when things are tough and not as much when things are going well. Support them. Encourage them. Counsel them to talk with their coach - we are people who care about our athletes and their well being. Please don't send us emails, because I'll only forward them on your athlete. Don't start a conversation with 'My daughter would kill me if she knew I called' because perhaps you shouldn't make the call. Just remember, it's going to be hard. If it wasn't hard, more people would be in your position.”

“I realize that today’s club parents have a vested interest in their child’s success.” Says Stuck. “Knowing the monthly costs of club volleyball and the small percentage of players that actually obtain an athletic scholarship, the pressure to make that investment come full circle can be stressful. If parents added up the amount of money spent on dues, travel, equipment, facility costs and multiplied that amount by the number of years played, the

total is staggering. I believe this creates an undercurrent of entitlement for some and a sense that club players deserve an athletic scholarship.” She says.

Amanda Burbridge is the Head Volleyball Coach at Phoenix College. “I am seeing the increasing pressure to get a college scholarship that some parents are putting on their daughters.” She notes. “The parents stress out over who has a scholarship, and who doesn’t. The competition for these scholarships is obviously something to think about, but a full time preoccupation is being made from recruiting their daughters out.”

“When I have more interaction with the parents during recruiting than the player”, Burbridge says, “I assume the player is not all that interested, and all the push is from the parent. When I get into this situation, I tell the parent that unless I hear more from the player, I will not continue to recruit them. The player really must be the most active participant in coming to college. Now, with that said, players that come with no parent help or guidance, get lost. Guidance, support, advice is all wonderful, but taking over for the player is not. I have definitely stopped recruiting a player due to a parent that was overly anxious about selling their daughter to me. Telling me how awesome they are and how much they want to play in college is great, one time. But, by the fourth time telling me this, I am running for the hills. The fear is getting a player that is out of touch with their abilities due to parents telling them how amazing they are. These players miss the reality that their game needs improvement.”

Often times, the pressure put on the athlete by the parent, and the parent’s need to feel they are doing all they can for their child can spill over into ugly behavior that has dotted the landscape of Youth Sports more and more in the past decade.

Parent Behavior

- In February of this year, a Massachusetts YMCA informed the parents of the participants of the youth basketball league they were not welcomed to attend their children’s last game due to their unmanageable and disruptive behavior they had exhibited in previous games that season.
- A few years back, in Greenwich Township, New Jersey, a community league basketball game for girls ages 10 and 11 ended with one angry father reportedly kicking the wife of the winning team’s coach. Witnesses say the meltdown began when a woman in the crowd began taunting players.
- In Pennsylvania, a parent body-slammed a high school referee after he ordered the man’s wife out of the gym for allegedly yelling obscenities during a basketball game. The referee was treated at a hospital for a concussion.

These kinds of alarming news items grab our attention, but often times sports parents dismiss them as “those nut jobs!” I would never do that!

However it is not uncommon at our Region tournaments to see adults screaming at 12 and 14 year olds because they missed a line call, or chant “score, score, score” when a player misses the turning of the board.

Consider in an August 26th poll in USA Today, 94% of respondents said they had witnessed bad behavior among adults at youth sports games. The respondents were all adults!

In a stunning 2005 study entitled, *The Sport Behavior of Youth, Parents and Coaches, The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*, parents were asked the question, “How often have you acted like a bad sport when your child’s team lost?”

The answer was 100%!

Often times, it is the officials that feel the brunt of parent over involvement. The Officials chairperson for the Arizona Region, Peter Meyer has seen dramatic differences in recent years. “Five or 6 years ago, as we grew,

we began to see an escalation of 'thoughtless' parental involvement in our Region's competitions." Meyer states flatly. "Whether these are isolated incidents, or a result of some imagined sense of entitlement, they'd been increasing in frequency. As the Chair, part of my charge is to follow up on these incidents with the officials, site directors, and parents when appropriate."

A Region club director pointed out, "Parents have no problem coming onto a tournament floor to complain about their kid's playing time or position. They'll find you in the parking lot after a tournament, or waiting for you outside the bathroom. They struggle with the concept that we, as coaches have to worry about the team, the 10 or 12 girls, not the 1. And that seems to be a very hard message for them to comprehend."

Turning the Tide?

Stuck sees all of us working together as a way out of this. "Parents, teachers, club and high school coaches are all instrumental in preparing the club athlete for a successful collegiate athletic experience. It's time to get back to preparing the club athlete for the emotional challenges they will face in college, rather than protecting and insulating them from those challenges."

The Arizona Region has been selected as a test model for a new program called "Parents as Partners Initiative" overseen by the Promise of Good Sports. This program will be available for clubs this season. The goal? "To enhance the sports experiences of athletes, coaches and parents by reducing patterns of conduct that detract from sport's ability to inspire, empower and unify members of team communities." Clubs can contact the Region office to get started with this program.

Choate sees kids playing out of love, not fame or money. "Kids, play volleyball because you love playing, not because it's a means to an end. Parents, cheer for your daughter whether she's good or bad, she's your daughter, which is already a blessing. Don't expect a scholarship, but be grateful if one comes along. Whatever you do, don't bother telling coaches how good she is, we do this for a living and we're not listening anyways." He adds, "Coaches, ease up on the pressure. We have 15 and 16 year olds out their being pushed into decisions they are not ready or capable of making yet. I wish I could suggest a better way, but I don't know one. Maybe I do, parents, tell these coaches to get lost! Coaches, be honest with these kids and let them grow up a little and be stress free, they have more important things to stress over."

"I am a parent with three children." Rubio says. "My hope is that I can draw the line between being too involved and not involved enough. I do know through my recruiting experiences that my objective is to allow my children, should they decide to play sports, to fail and succeed on their own merit. This is why my children are strongly encouraged to play sports. It teaches them how to deal with the ups and downs and life's trying moments."

While parent behavior continues to be a distraction at Region events, Meyer and his staff are at work. "The Region and the Official's division developed a plan for focusing our awareness on these behaviors as well as dealing with them at the sites and afterward if necessary. The Official's division wrote a 'Parental Participation Pact' which outlined our protocol for dealing with parents at the playing site." Meyer adds, "I believe that the enhanced attention by the division and increased focus by the Region on these issues has resulted in a reduction of parental interference. I know that it still occurs, and probably always will, but I also believe that we can positively deal with these occasional incidents." In the end, Meyer states the obvious. "Parental education by cubs and officials is the key to changing attitudes & behaviors."

"The bottom line is we all need to respect each other and our respective duties. Parents should be encouraged, NO, required by their cub directors and coaches to "Cheer, not Jeer". Meyer adds smiling, "There's some great stuff going on out on our courts and we need to appreciate the hard work the kids put in!"

The Coaches interviewed for this article were hesitant to put their names in the article, for fear it may cost them recruits in the end but they all left their names in because the problem continues to grow.

Mooney was no exception. “When originally asked for input on this subject I had thought to myself if I should answer as gentle or politically correct as possible or should I just speak my true thoughts and wondered if we may lose recruits as a result of this response being perceived as abrasive. Obviously, the true thoughts side was what I went with based on one thing; if a recruit or their parents are offended to the point of advising their daughter of signing at another school as a result of reading and implying upon the thoughts above, it’s probably better that she does go somewhere else because she most likely wouldn’t do well in our environment, and we then have come full circle to the original question.”

Ah yes, the original question; Are parents hurting their athlete’s chances for a scholarship? There are, of course, parents who don't call coaches, are well-behaved and who do encourage their children and the teams they play for. Unfortunately, coaches and club directors spend so much time on helicopter parents that the parents who exhibit good and healthy behaviors are often ignored or overlooked in order to tend to the dotting helicopter parents. Many parents will read this and think of others they know that might fit the helicopter profile. Yet when this article was given to one high school varsity volleyball coach to read, she immediately responded with, “Oh my god, this is me and I had no idea!”

John Kessel, the USA Volleyball director of grassroots says there’s one thing you can always say to your athlete, win or lose, good performance or bad that cuts to the real foundation of youth sports.

“I just love to watch you play.”