

# **WIN OR LOSE**

**A Guide to Sports Parenting**

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# INTRODUCTION

This is a little booklet to help you stay out of your children's athletic way. I wrote it with two assumptions: a) parents love their children; b) parents don't always love their children in ways that are helpful to them. We sometimes make mistakes in the stands or in the car ride home, just as our children make mistakes on the field. These mistakes are a part of the learning process for everyone, including psychologists. Young athletes run into problems when they think they can get by with a half-hearted effort, and so do parents.

What does a whole-hearted effort mean as a sports parent? I don't think it necessarily means spending more money on private instruction or cheering louder from the sidelines, but it could mean, paying more attention to how your behavior is affecting your child's athletic experience and less attention to the wins and losses.

When you think about it, the most important scoreboard in youth sports is never the one on the field; it is the one in your child's eyes as you are driving home from the game.

**THINK MATH**

Most of us have an easier time being math parents than we do being sports parents. We don't stand over our children as they're doing their homework, hollering at them to round to the highest decimal or carry their zero. We trust that they'll be able to figure things out on their own, and if they can't, they'll get the help they need from their teachers or by asking us.

What a lot of sports parents seem to forget is that young athletes also need the same space to figure things out on their own. They need to learn how to think and make decisions during game situations, which isn't easy to do when your parent (or someone else's parent) is shouting out directions.

The reality is that if your child could score a goal or stop a defender, he would. In most cases, telling your child to move faster to the ball is like telling him to be taller. Effort isn't the only critical factor in sports, or in math. Some children will never be high-level athletes no matter how hard they try, which is by no means a tragedy. The world doesn't necessarily need more young people who are willing to try and make our world a better place.

## BE THE SPORTS PARENT YOU WISH YOU HAD

There is no point in continuing a parenting legacy that wasn't helpful to you as a young athlete. Children don't benefit in any way from having parents who are too hard on them. They don't become tougher. They don't become more successful. They just become more afraid.

Competitive sports can be a very psychologically-demanding experience, and the last thing a kid needs is to have to worry about his parents becoming upset with him about his performance. Children quickly learn that there is no unconditional love in youth sports, that playing time, rankings, and awards all have to be earned, but it is a great disadvantage if they have this same feeling when they come home to their family.

Unconditional love doesn't mean that you love everything that your child does; it rather means that you will keep loving your child in spite of what they do. In the context of sports parenting, it means that you will rise above your frustration and insecurity and show your love no matter what the outcome of the game, no matter how your child happens to perform. You will respect your child's best efforts, and through your respect, they will learn to respect themselves, as well as their teammates, coaches, opponents, and officials.

## FORGET ABOUT SCHOLARSHIPS FOR A WHILE

As a sports parent, you set yourself up for disappointment when you start expecting a return on your investment. From a financial standpoint, you are much better off taking the money you spend on your child's sports activities and investing it directly in a fund for their college. A less risky investment approach is to think of enjoying time with your child. The good and bad news about youth travel sports is that a great deal more time is spent traveling and waiting than actually playing the sport. This means that you will be afforded the luxury of having huge chunks of time with your child.

Can you make some good memories out of this time together? You will probably have an easier time doing so if you don't view your child's sport as a ticket to their (and your) greatness. If your child is meant to be a collegiate or professional athlete, it will happen – but not because you made it happen. It will happen because it is their athletic destiny. In the mean time, relax and enjoy the ride. There will come a time in the not-so-distant future when you won't have as many opportunities to hang out with your child. As one mother once told me about parenthood, "The hours can sometimes go slow, but the years go so fast,"

## LISTEN TO YOURSELF IN THE STANDS

One of my children's soccer coaches met with the parents before the season and said that the only thing he wants us to be shouting out to his players during the game was, 'Go Wolves!' He didn't even want us to say 'nice pass,' since he wasn't confident that all of us knew what qualified as a nice pass. His point was that he didn't want the sidelines to get too crowded with self-appointed coaches. He wanted us to just be parents, preferably quiet parents.

A lot of parents get caught up in being spectators and seem to forget they are at a youth sporting event. They yell and scream as if they are at a Red Wings hockey game, cheering for their favorite professional athletes. Needless to say, it can be an intoxicating experience to watch our children competing successfully in their sports, but for their sake, and for the sake of their teammates, we need to keep perspective. We need to remind ourselves that there aren't really any do-or-die games, that life will go on pretty much the same no matter how tough the loss.

As a parent, you should never forget that you are at your children's sporting events to support them; they aren't there to perform for you. The last thing your kids need when they are on the field is to hear you advertising all your frustrations, both with them and with yourself. If you are ever in doubt about what to say in the stands, you can always follow the simple adage: if you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all.

## KEEP THE FOCUS ON LEARNING

Your child will feel under less pressure if she views every game as an opportunity to learn something about her sport (and herself as a player) rather than as a time to prove herself. Sports can be a wonderful classroom for young athletes, providing that the adults involved don't place a greater importance on winning rather than learning. This isn't to say that your child shouldn't be competitive, but rather that your zeal for winning as a parent shouldn't override hers as an athlete. Your job as a sports parent is to remind your child that the wins and losses will take care of themselves as long as she continues loving her sport and is willing to devote herself to this love.

Young athletes fall out of love with their respective sport when the learning process is no longer fun for them. As a sports parent you might not be able to control all aspects of your child's athletic experience, but you can at least make sure that you're not adding to their burden by putting pressure on them to succeed. You can try to make your sports relationship with your child a fun one, so that it feels that your family is winning no matter what ends up happening on the field.

## TRY PLAYING THEIR SPORT

You might want to consider joining an adult league to appreciate how difficult it is to trap and kick a soccer ball. The same is true of tennis, figure skating, basketball, hockey, dance, baseball, gymnastics, softball, golf, or track. It can be a humbling experience to realize that the sports look so easy from the field.

I came to appreciate my daughter's experience as a soccer goalkeeper the one year I played this same position on a men's soccer team. One valuable lesson I learned as a goalie is that the outcome of a game isn't always within our control. Parents who've never played competitive sports have a hard time accepting this reality. They think that practice makes perfect. It doesn't. Players who practice hard still make mistakes. They still need to learn to forgive themselves in order to keep their competitive fire alive.

Many parents have a hard time forgiving their children for not being better athletes than they were in their youth. The challenge of forgiveness is that you must first show it to yourself before you show it to others. In the context of sports, this means coming to peace with the athlete you once were, with the athlete you are, so that you can be in a better position to help your child accept their strengths and weaknesses.

## FIND COACHES YOU CAN TRUST

The good thing about finding coaches you can trust is that you can then sit back and enjoy watching your children play. You don't have to bother telling them what they're doing wrong or right. You don't have to remind your kids to tie their shoes. You only have to be willing to give up control.

This is the first step in letting your child grow up as a young athlete, and for many parents, it isn't an easy step. A common fear of parents is that the coach won't look out for their child's best interest and their confidence will be damaged in the process. In some cases, this fear is warranted, since there are coaches who put their own win-loss records above the developmental needs of their young athletes. For this reason, it's important to learn as much as you can about a coach before committing your child to his team.

However, there are also many fine coaches who can have a positive impact on your child's athletic upbringing. You need to find these coaches and then give them the space to work with your child. You can't limit your child by trying to be the only significant influence in their life, because there will be a time when they will need to learn something that you won't be able to teach them. A great coach, like a great teacher, is a gift that your child will remember for their entire lifetime.

## APPRECIATE THE TIME WITH YOUR CHILD

It is easy to take what we have for granted, easy to get caught up in the elitism of youth sports and find ourselves fretting over rankings and championships. We all can't help but live vicariously through our children to some extent. We all are drawn to taste some of their glory. But we realize how small and secondary their athletic glory is when someone in our community suffers a tragic loss.

Natalia Reed-Lopez was a fourteen-year-old girl who played in the same soccer club as my daughter. She was hit by a car and died over the summer while her family was visiting Spain. She and my daughter played on the same indoor team a few years back. I have a vivid memory of her coming off the field and being hugged by her mother. I can imagine just a little of what her parents must be going through, since I saw what my parents went through after my sister was hit by a car and killed in Jamaica.

At a recent tournament, Natalia teammates passed out "memorial cards," explaining why they wore the number 17 on the sleeve of their jersey. Natalia's picture is on the card, along with the quote "Siempre en nuestros corazones." In Spanish, this means, "Always in our hearts."

## KNOW WHEN TO CALL TIME-OUT

The time to call time-out is when your child doesn't seem to be enjoying their sport. As their parent, you need to take a protective interest in their athletic passion and help them to understand what might be interfering. Sometimes young athletes lose interest in them. While many coaches preach commitment to their players, they might not reciprocate with this commitment in the games when it comes to playing time.

Unfortunately, many parents encourage their children to try out for the most elite area when they might be happier on teams where they feel like a more valued member. The superficial status that might be delivered from wearing a warm-up jacket of an elite team or putting their decal on the back of a car doesn't make up for the emptiness a young athlete feels when he is left on the bench game after game.

Parents of younger athletes can schedule a meeting with their child's coach to share their concerns, but many coaches of high school age athletes believe that the goal of the team is to win, and that players need to sacrifice their individual goals for the goal of the team. While all athletes need to make sacrifices for the good of the team, it is not realistic for a player to continue making sacrifices without receiving some reward in return. In my high school locker room, there was a sign that read, "When the going gets tough, the tough get going." When a friend of mine quit the football team, the only explanation he offered was, "When the going gets boring, the bored get going."

## PLAY CATCH IN THE YARD

Chances are that your child's love for sports began in a back yard or a driveway, and it can be good for their athletic soul (and yours) to get back to their roots. The beauty of sports is that it can bring people closer together, including parents and children, and yet sometimes the fast track of youth sports can have the opposite effect on families. More, bigger, and farther doesn't always add up to better when it comes to travel sports.

A common question sports parents ask themselves after spending two nights in a hotel and driving home seven hours from a tournament: "Is this all really worth it?" But I have never asked myself this same question when I shoot baskets with my kids in the driveway. The moment is too reaffirming for me to even consider asking the question. I think what makes these moments so special is that I'm playing with my children again instead of just standing on the sidelines with my hands in my pockets and watching them.

One thing I've also noticed is that when you're playing with your children there isn't the same tendency to feel critical of them. The criticism seems to come with distance, and it's hard to feel distant from your child when you're playing them one-on-one in the driveway and they're shouting to the heavens how they're finally going to beat you once and for all.

## ENCOURAGE OTHER INTERESTS

It puts too much pressure on young athletes to have their whole lives revolve around their sport. The athletes who get the most nervous in competition are often the ones who have put all of their psychic eggs in one basket and fear that they will be left empty if they fail. They have trouble seeing themselves as anything beyond a gifted athlete. They might even come to believe the reason people like them is because they're good at their sport.

While I have always known the importance of raising well-rounded children, my wife sometimes still needs to remind me to turn off the TV during basketball season. She is determined to make sure that we don't become a family that can only be together when playing or watching sports. Good for her. I think every family needs someone to remind the group that there is an active and compelling life beyond athletic competition.

Lately, when our kids complain and ask why they have to go to religious school, I tell them, "So you'll know that there is something else in the world besides sports," What they don't know is that when I was their age sports truly was a religion. It was the one place I felt most alive. But I want them to feel a security that runs deeper than wins and losses.

## STOP COMPARING

You will have a much better experience as a sports parent if you stop comparing your child to his fellows athletes. Youth sports doesn't need to become a contest between parents to see whose child is the most gifted. These contests take up so much energy and don't really prove much of anything. They don't prove that you're a better parent or that your child is a better person or that they're destined to have a better life.

There is no evidence that elite athletes grow up to be happier than average athletes. However, there is anecdotal evidence that suggests that people who are constantly comparing end up feeling painfully alone. They feel alone when they feel better than others, as well as when they feel worse than others. You really can't win at the comparison game.

When I find myself comparing my children in an insecure moment, I remind myself that in twenty years it won't really matter how good they were in sports. What'll matter more is what they learned from their sports experience about how to live the rest of their lives. I hope one of the things my children learn from sports is a universal respect for everyone they meet on their path. I know this respect will serve them well in life. I also know that the more I feel this respect, the easier it will be for them to feel it as they mature.

## THINK OF RAISING AN ACTIVE ADULT

Instead of daydreaming about your child being the next Tiger Woods, you might want to try daydreaming about your child being an active and sports loving fifty-year old. Picture him playing in a 45 & over tennis tournament or in a rec basketball league. Picture him hiking up a mountain with your future grandchildren. For every Tiger Woods, there are probably millions of young people who have been turned off by sports and fitness and are at risk for becoming couch potatoes in adulthood.

The best way to raise an active fifty-year-old is to create good memories around sports and fitness. You can start by trying to have fun yourself as their parent. Think of their tournaments as a mini vacation and check the mirror from time to time to make sure you have a vacation-like expression on your face. For your children's sake and for your sake as well, you don't want to look as if you're in the middle of a war zone. That just puts too much pressure on your child to do something heroic to make you happy.

The message I try to give my children is that the athlete who loves sports the longest is the true winner. I joke about being able to beat them in basketball when I'm in my seventies and they're in their forties. I happen to play basketball at the YMCA with a seventy-year-old man named Coleman Jewitt. He always has something nice to say about the way I've played, even on those days when I can barely manage to hit the backboard.

## NURTURE MENTAL KINDNESS

It is a myth that punishing yourself will make you a better athlete. Mental toughness has nothing to do with being tough on yourself. It has to do with being completely immersed in the competitive moment, which is hard for a young athlete to do if she's afraid of losing, or has coaches or parents who are afraid of losing.

The most successful athletes can calmly look defeat in the eye, the way a Buddhist monk can look Death in the eye, I don't agree with Vince Lombardi's quote, "Defeat is worse than death, because you have to live with defeat."

Young athletes will have an easier time forgiving themselves if they come to accept that victory and defeat are just different sides of the same coin. Both sides are equally valuable. I tell my own children "Don't play competitive sports if you're not willing to have your heart broken." The good news is that mental kindness can help heal an athlete's heart relatively quickly. As a parent, you might be able to facilitate this healing process with an accepting smile or pat on the back. You often don't have to say much to your kids after a game. They can usually tell what you're feeling just by looking at you.

## STOP FOR ICE CREAM

As a sports psychologist, I happen to be a big fan of ice cream. I think it helps kids still feel like kids in an age when sports childhoods end so quickly. My son's soccer childhood ended when he joined an elite travel team in the Detroit area. At age ten, he became a soccer adolescent. During practices and games, he carries himself with the maturity and focus of a young man; with an ice cream cone in one hand, he seems to have permission to be the boy that he is.

At the risk of sounding corny, it is important to remember that elite athletes need love. They don't just need personal trainers, coaches, camps, and sports psychologists. They need families where they can act their own age. Young athletes often feel the pressure of always having to be in control, and it helps them to have a place where they can let go and be themselves.

A stop for ice cream can also help soothe a young athlete's aching heart after a tough loss. Ice cream serves as a reminder that life can still be sweet in spite of the disappointments that feel momentarily bitter. Ice cream is about celebrating the game and not just its outcome.

## FIND YOUR OWN GLORY

It can be easy to forget that our children aren't ourselves. They don't think exactly as we think. They don't feel exactly as we feel. They don't have the same goals that we do now, or even the same goals that we had when we were at their age. What many parents view as stubbornness is simply a young athlete's desire to be their own person, at their own pace, on their own terms.

However, it isn't unusual for parents to want to protect their children from the frustrations they might have experienced themselves as young athletes. They want their children to learn from their mistakes; in some cases, they might even want their children to make up for their mistakes. Needless to say, this isn't something that children are capable of doing for their parents no matter how much they love them.

As sports parents, we owe it to our children to find our own glory, so that they can be free to find their own glory, or to do without glory if they do happen to choose. Not every child feels the need to be great at sports. Not every child feels the need to be better than other children. This isn't necessarily a problem unless the child happens to have a parent with an unmet need for greatness. If you happen to be such a parent, don't panic. I assure you that you're not alone. For the time being, I would just encourage you to take responsibility for how you're feeling and not slip this unmet need into your children's backpacks. After all, you probably don't want your kids to be members of the Club of People With An Unmet Need For Greatness when they're adults.

## SHOW MORE INTEREST IN THEIR SCHOOL LIFE

Lately, I've been making an effort to be a better school parent. I don't want my kids to go around thinking that their sports are more important than their schoolwork, because sports is what seems to excite their father. My confession is that as a child I always liked sports more than school, and yet now, as an adult, I've come to appreciate the importance of learning steadily and quietly without a big scoreboard or screaming fans. I make it a point of asking my kids about school everyday, so we won't fall into the rut of talking about sports. I know there will probably come a day in the future when sports doesn't have the same importance in their lives, and I want my relationship with them to be diverse and flexible enough to accommodate this change. I figure that way we won't be stuck with awkward silences that can only be broken by reminiscing about a soccer tournament they played when they were twelve years old.

I've always rediscovered how enjoyable it is to read some of my favorite books like *Catcher in the Rye*. It's a thrill to be able to sit at the kitchen table and talk about Holden Caulfield, as big of a thrill as being able to watch her dive in the goalie box and make a game-winning save. There was a time when she used to talk about playing soccer for North Carolina like Mia Hamm, but now she talks about going to a good school like Michigan or Berkley. She accepts that she probably won't be good enough to play soccer in college. I'm relieved when I hear her explain to people that she now plays soccer for fun.

## TRUST THEIR ATHLETIC DESTINY

None of us sports parents can know what the future has in store for our young athletes. None of us can control our children's athletic future, even though most of us will try. We'll look for the best coaches, teams, and camps to maximize their talent. We'll do all that we can to give them the best shot at success, which is fine; but after we've done our thing as parents, we need to learn to let go and trust that their sports lives will unfold the way they were meant to unfold.

If we don't let go, we'll surely drive ourselves and our kids' crazy in the process. What does letting go mean? It could mean stepping back and letting your children do more to manage their own sports lives. Let them make more decisions about their training schedule. Let them pack their own bags before tournaments. These small shifts of responsibility might not seem so significant, but they give the message to your kids that you're willing to let their sports become more their own.

As a sports parent, you'll have an easier time letting go if you remind yourself that your child's athletic future isn't a matter of life survival. They will ultimately be okay to the extent that they think you'll be okay. And you'll be okay to the extent that you can see their athletic potential as just a small part of their potential as a human being.

## GO EASY ON THE ADVICE

The last thing your child is likely to want to when she is feeling down after a tough loss is to hear you talk for the whole car ride home about what she did wrong or could have done right. Think for a second about what you want when you're feeling down. Do you want someone to explain to you how you shouldn't be disappointed? Do you want someone to list everything you did to bring the disappointment upon yourself? Or do you want them to just be with you and accept how you're feeling?

Too often sports advice feels better for the parent who is giving it than for the young athlete who has to hear it. Although parental advice is most often given out of love, the child can experience it as undermining, as giving the message, "You don't know how to figure things out, so I'll figure them out for you." Instead of trying to fix their lives with all of our well-intended advice, we need to be patient enough to let them fix their own lives, as well as patient enough to realize that some things can't and won't need to be fixed.

You might also discover that less of a need you have to constantly be giving advice, the more likely your children might be to ask for it. Timing and receptivity are everything when it comes to learning. As a parent, you have to trust that your child has sought you out as a teacher in the past and will continue to do so again and again as needed. An important thing to keep in mind is that they might be much more inclined to learn by watching you than by listening to what you have to say.

## FORGIVE THE REF

Granted, the referees can sometimes be so easy to hate, but I challenge you to go a whole tournament weekend without hating anything. Show your kids that someone can be very passionate about something without having an enemy. This will be helpful to your children as young competitors. It will make them so “mentally tough” that they will relate to the referees like the wind and not waste their time getting angry with them. They will learn to accept their own best effort and the best efforts of others, including those of the referees.

As a sports parent, it is ultimately more important to learn to forgive your own child, but focusing on the referee might be a good place to start. You can even imagine what it would be like to be a referee surrounded by intensely-involved parents, knowing that within the next hour you are bound to disappoint some of them. You can try to have compassion for the referee, who might still be a minor; then, after a while, you can switch your focus and try to have compassion for your own child when he doesn't play up to your expectations. We all know what it feels like to not measure up, to not feel we are good enough. The most critical parents are usually the ones who have suffered from the most criticism.

## HIDE THE BALLS FOR A WHILE

It could be good for your child to miss her sport, which she might not have the opportunity to do when she's playing year round. The break might help to remind her of her love for the game, remind her that she is playing out of choice and not obligation. Who knows? The break could even prove to be good for your family. There are a lot of different ways to spend your weekend when you don't have to venture into a neighboring state for a tournament.

Some sports parents are afraid that their children will lose their competitive edge if they're away from their sport for too long. From my experience, competitive desire is more often suffocated than it is lost. It is suffocated by attitudes that make a young athlete's sport feel like work instead of play. In the adult world, it is admirable to work hard and not take off much time from work. It is admirable to be constantly busy. But maybe the hearts of young athletes have slightly different needs.

While children need structure in their lives, they also need free time in order to express their creativity, even their athletic creativity. One thing I like about the summer is that our children get to play sports on their own, without adult supervision. They play basketball at the park. They juggle a soccer ball in the yard. They invent games with their friends to pass the time. They fall into a slower, less goal-oriented, rhythm that seems to rejuvenate them. Then, by the end of July, they start to feel bored and start counting the days until soccer practice begins. I like watching this process. It assures me that their athletic passion is coming from within themselves and not from me.

## MAKE PEACE WITH CHANGE

Our children's athletic lives are constantly changing, and as their parents, we need to be agile and graceful enough to change with them. We can't get too attached to the team decals on the back of our vans, because there is no guarantee that next year our child will be playing on the same team, or even playing the same sport.

As parents, we might have certain plans for our children's athletic lives, but we have to accept that the Sports Universe has its own plans and its own timetable. This means we need to be patient. We sometimes just need to wait and watch. We can't force our children to follow our vision or even follow a vision they once had. We have to accept that their visions will change. We have to let them grow up.

The biggest change that looms on the horizon for all sports parents is the day when our children's competitive sports activities will come to an end. For most of us, this is hard to imagine, even heart-breaking to imagine, but I still think it's important to pull back the lens from time to time and get a wider parental perspective. It helps counteract the addictive quality of the sports parenthood experience. It helps remind us that sports is only a small part of our relationship with our children, even during those seasons when it seems to take up so much of our time.

## KEEP A SENSE OF HUMOR

Your child will last longer as a competitive athlete, and you will last longer as a sports parent, if you can learn to maintain your sense of humor under fire. The sports families that seem to have the hardest times are the ones who head off to competition as if they were heading into a war zone. The father sits at the steering wheel of his SUV like a tank commander; the mother sits like an army medic awaiting casualties; and junior sits in the back seat as if his life were on the line. It reminds me of a quote from a golfer, Chi Chi Rodriguez. When asked if he felt under a lot of pressure to make a final putt to win a championship, he replied, "Pressure isn't about making a final putt to win golf tournaments. Pressure is about picking enough cotton to feed your family at the end of the day."

Fortunately, most of us aren't relying on our children's athletic performances to put food on the table. The desperation is only in our minds, which invariably then seeps into the minds of our children. The good news is that our lightness can also seep into the minds of our children. They can learn from us to smile in the face of misfortune and look ahead to the next game. In youth sports, there is always another game, and the most successful athletes learn to laugh with their teammates, laugh with their families, laugh at the crazy and magical world of sports that can leave us feeling like we're on top of the clouds one minute and neck deep in quicksand the next.

## TAKE A HIKE

I'm not talking about taking a hike out of your children's athletic lives-even though there might come a time when that is temporarily a good idea-but rather taking a hike with them in the woods or mountains. I go hiking every year with my kids in the Adirondacks, thanks to some generous friends letting us use their cottage. It's great fun, challenging fun, beautiful fun. I think what I like most about hiking is its simplicity. You just put on a pair of boots, fill up a pack with whatever you need, and start walking. There is absolutely none of the tension that is so often a part of competitive sports for young athletes and their parents.

In other words, you tend not to worry about beating or losing to the mountain when you set foot on a trail. You tend not to care about what the mountain is ranked. My kids and their friends don't even seem to care about who is the faster hiker. Why should they care? It's not like there is some kind of Olympic Development Program for hikers or college scouts hiding in the woods. Just squirrels, rabbits, coyotes, foxes, and bears. My children love hearing the story of my bear encounter when I was hiking in Yosemite, even though the bear wandered off to the other end of the campsite and I didn't need to do anything heroic. Hiking and camping lend themselves to storytelling, especially on mountain tops and around the campfire. I sometimes wish we could sit around the campfire at soccer tournaments, roasting marshmallows and telling stories.

## TAKE LOTS OF PICTURES

I have come to appreciate all the pictures my wife takes at games and tournaments. She takes pictures of our children, their teammates and friends, the parents of their teammates and friends. We have become friends with a number of these parents. I have even become friends with a couple of their coaches. It makes any journey so much richer when you can make friends along the way, and I'm sure these friendships are what I'll remember most when their competitive sports days are over.

When I look at older pictures, it occurs to me how many people our children have met through their sports activities. In addition to their teammates, they've also gotten to know players on other teams, some who now play on the same team as they do. Over the years, all the little rivalries seem to fade, and I'm left with a feeling that we are all a part of the same community, the same sports family. There are people in this sports family from all over the world, people with different political leanings, people who I probably would never have gotten to know if we hadn't had children on the same teams.

The other day, I looked at my son's team picture from a recent tournament and felt so glad for him. I didn't feel glad because they were holding up a trophy and had ribbons around their necks. I felt glad because I knew he was standing alongside friends who he would remember for the rest of his life.

## WIN OR LOSE

**When you become a sports parent, you take an oath to always be there for your child. Win or lose, you will love them; win or lose, you will respect them; win or lose, you will accept them with all of their strengths and limitations. The oath of sports parenthood can even be more binding than marriage, because a child can't go out and look for a seemingly more talented child.**

**When we take an oath of sports parenthood, we must do it with patience and an open mind. We can't expect everything to come easily for us. Some of us might need to overcome bad habits in the stands just as our children need to overcome bad habits on the field. But our motivation for improvement should be very high considering what's at stake. As sports parents, we need to look at our child's well being as our World Cup, Wimbledon, Masters, Olympics, Super Bowl, Stanley Cup, and World Series. Our goal should be to guide them toward athletic experiences that bring out the best in them, as well the best in our relationship with them.**

**As long as sports bring you and your kid closer together, you'll always be winning; as long as it pushes the two of you apart, you'll always be losing. It's a simple formula, simple family math.**

**I have tried to think out loud about my experience as a sports parent in an effort to remind you that you're not alone wrestling with your oath. You are sharing the sidelines with millions of others including myself. I would be honored if this booklet might help enrich your journey as a sports parent and push you a little closer to some of your goals. I know one of my goals is to be able to enjoy each of my children's games while it is happening, win or lose. I must confess that I haven't reached my goal yet, but I have days where it feels like I'm getting close, days where I can feel my parental sports heart opening a little wider.**

**All the best to you and your sports family. I hope to see you on the sidelines sometime.**

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