

An Open Letter to My Dad, who Makes Me Want to Quit Sports

by John O'Sullivan / Wednesday, 31 August 2016 / Published in Parenting, Problems in Youth Sports

Dear Dad,

I was afraid to say this to your face after the game today, but I was thinking that maybe you could stop coming to my games for a while. It doesn't seem that fun for you anyway, and I know it's not fun for me when you are there. I used to love when you watched my play when I was younger, but now, I wish you weren't there. I think I am starting to hate playing soccer. I might quit. I bet you are wondering why.

I heard you in the stands today during my soccer game. I was going to say I heard you cheering, but that wasn't really what you were doing. You were coaching. You were yelling about the other team, the other coaches, and at the officials. I also heard you yelling at me every time I got the ball.

I believe you think you are helping, but you are not. You are confusing me.

It's confusing when you coach me from the sideline. When I play soccer, I feel like I have to make so many decisions at a time. Should I dribble or pass? Should I cross or shoot? Should I step up or stay back? Where are my teammates? Where are the defenders? I am trying to figure all these things out while out of breath, and fighting off defenders. With all this going on, you want me to listen to you, too? It seems no matter what I do, whether good or bad, you continue to yell at me. It is impossible to listen to you and play the game at the same time.

It is confusing when you and the coach shout instructions at the same time. I can't listen to both of you. Many times the things you say contradict what the coach teaches me at practice. My coach is trying to get me to pass it out of the back, but you keep yelling at me to kick it long. My coach encourages me to dribble past players, but you tell me to get rid of it when I try to dribble. My coach tells me to pass the ball to feet, but you tell me to kick it over the top and our forwards will chase it down. I either get yelled at by my coach, or by you. To make matters worse, sometimes the other parents join in and yell, too! I am so stressed out there. It's not a very good feeling.

It's confusing to me when you yell at the officials, especially since you teach me to respect teachers, coaches and my elders. Dad, some of these referees are kids that go to my school. I see them at lunch and in the halls and I am so embarrassed. Would you yell at me like that if I was a new referee? Even when the officials are right, and you are standing 50 yards away, you yell at them. I wish you would just let the game play out and let me and my coach handle what is going on.

It's confusing when you are still upset about the loss hours after a game. How long is it appropriate to be sad and angry? I mean, I am the one who played, right? We are supposed to win some and lose some if we play good teams, right? We got beat, but now we have to move on and get ready for the next game. I am not sure how staying angry will help me get better for the next game. I certainly don't feel like learning much immediately after a loss. The best thing you can do after a game is tell me you are proud of me for competing, and showing good sportsmanship, and that you love to watch me play. What are we going to eat is helpful too. But that's all. I can get better next practice.

It's confusing when you talk badly about my coach in front of me. You tell me to respect my coach and listen to what he says, but then I hear you and other parents say he doesn't know what he is doing. My friends

say that their dads tell them not to listen to the coach, and they don't know who to listen to anymore. No wonder our coach gets so frustrated with us.

It's confusing when you talk badly about my teammates in front of me. I know some of my teammates aren't as fast, or as strong, or don't kick as well, but they are my friends, Dad. In school, they teach me that I should treat everyone with respect, but then you disrespect my teammates right in front of me. I wish you would try to see the good in my friends instead of pointing out their faults.

It's confusing when you yell and scream at mistakes and act like playing soccer is an easy thing to do. I am not sure if you remember what it was like to be a player. Do you remember what it was like to be going through a growth spurt, and feeling awkward when you try to run and jump (never mind the sore knees)? Do you remember how hard it was to learn to trap or pass a soccer ball, or for that matter hit a baseball, or catch a fly ball? Sometimes you try your very best, and still get it wrong. It doesn't help or make me feel any better about my mistake when you yell at me for it, or tell me to "get my head in the game." What does that mean, anyway? You yell things and most of the time I have no idea what you are talking about.

Dad, I don't want to tell you how to parent or anything, but sometimes I feel like your love is conditional upon how the game goes.

When we win, everything is great, but whenever we lose, or I have a bad game, it seems like you hate me. I wish I was riding home with someone else, and not you. I think it's because you keep talking about the game when I don't want to. You go over every mistake. Even when we win, all I hear about is what went wrong. If you talked about the game at dinner, or the next morning, it would be fine, but please, not on the car ride home.

I certainly appreciate all the time and money you spend to let me play. But sometimes it feels like we are out there playing just to entertain the adults. We just want to play. And we want you to watch if you can do so without yelling at the refs, screaming at other parents, and coaching from the stands.

Could you do that for me dad? Could you just come, watch the game quietly, and then not talk about it on the ride home? If you can, I would love for you to come.

But if you can't, I would prefer if you just dropped me off and let me play.

Dad, I love sports, I love my team, and I love my teammates. I want to play with these guys forever, but not if it makes you hate me and angry at me all the time. Not if it makes me feel worse about myself.

Please let me know what you decide. I love you.

Your son,

Bobby, #10

(Every once in a while, we get an email or a post from a young athlete who has struggled with parental behavior in sports. These letters are heartbreaking, and very personal, so we do not republish them. This letter from "Bobby" is a compilation of the various stories we have heard from kids, not an actual letter we received. It is, however, an accurate reflection of the things we hear and see everyday on our sidelines. We ask all parents to please read this with your son or daughter, and share it with other parents you know. Ask your kids how they want you to act, how you can cheer in a helpful way, and when is a good time to talk about the game. When you ask, please listen to and respect their answer.