

The Car Ride Home Offers Game Plan for Parents of Young Athletes: Cheer, Encourage and Support!

By Taryn Zier

Parents relish the precious moments and life lessons their children glean through the teamwork, development and even the adversity that happen in youth sports.

Yet when the referee blows the whistle, many parents act as if they've received a green light for demeanor change. They chastise the ref, bark directives from the sideline or lecture their children based on their own standards of achievement. Essentially, they become poor sports, losing perspective on the positives taking place.

In his self-published book *The Car Ride Home*, Washington native Mike Bergstrom offers advice about the traps parents fall into when their children play sports. He writes honestly from his experience – and mistakes – as a coach and as a parent of three young athletes. Given our emotional involvement with our children and the competitiveness of sports, it's hard not to identify with at least one chapter of his book.

Bergstrom believes that one of our biggest blunders is to give our kids unsolicited advice, often critical, in the car ride home after a game. We compare our children to their teammates to try to boost their confidence or to get them to work harder. We criticize the coach or other players. Instead, Bergstrom recommends that we be constant cheerleaders, not fickle fans, and tell our children how proud we are of what they accomplished.

Parents should keep in mind that their child's idea of success frequently differs from their own, suggests Bergstrom. "A child who gets thrown out when they are up to bat may just be happy to get a hit," he points out. "They don't know it's a failure until we tell them it's a failure. In fact, kids are very resilient. They are usually on to the next thing, when we are still harboring the issue."

It isn't about wins or losses, he explains, but about encouraging our kids and supporting their growth. It is a privilege to watch them participate in sports, and they are supposed to have fun. Our job as a parent is threefold: To make sure their activities are safe, to get them to practice on time and to cheer for them unconditionally. The last of these – to cheer unconditionally – should be the most fun, but seems to be the hardest for parents.

As Bergstrom writes in *The Car Ride Home*, "Let's cheer when it is hardest to do so, because that is when your children need it the most." He cheers wildly when his teams are down so that his players know they are worthy of his support at all times, and not just when they are successful. Also, if parents aren't shouting instructions from the sideline, their kids have more freedom to learn from their mistakes.

Within the book's dozen chapters, Bergstrom reminds us that many of the rules of life also apply to sports etiquette: Treat others as you would like to be treated; actions speak louder than words; and if you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all. Bergstrom also writes about the best way to interact with coaches. He gives his take on being a parent coach, too.

As was Bergstrom's intent, the book is short and to the point, sans statistics and complicated illustrations of why parents do what they do. His 67 pages are written from the heart, with personal stories and humor. Through his accessible prose, we are reminded that parents play a powerful part in making their child's venture into sports a positive or negative experience.

The Car Ride Home, by Mike Bergstrom, (Altri Prima Publishing, 2008; \$7.95 paperback) may be purchased by visiting www.thecarridehome.com or www.amazon.com.

Taryn Zier is a freelance writer and mother of two based in Lake Forest Park. She looks forward to utilizing Bergstrom's advice when her son begins U6 soccer this fall.



Mike Bergstrom coaching his Evergreen Soccer Club Girls U-11 team in Everett. PHOTO BY SHELLY DERIFIELD

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