

CHAPTER FOUR

Avoiding the Talent Trap

At one time or another, most sports parents will fantasize about their child's success on the playing field – throwing the winning touchdown or swishing the game-winning basket at the buzzer. Some sports parents even wonder, “Could my child have the talent to play in the pros?”

These feelings and aspirations are natural for parents, but here's the reality: the chances of any child – including yours – becoming a professional athlete are not good.

NCAA statistics indicate that fewer than 1 in 200 high school seniors playing baseball will get drafted by a professional team. For football it's 1 in 1,000. For basketball, 1 in 3,333 for boys and 1 in 5,000 for girls. As long as these odds are, they overstate the case because the majority of drafted athletes never make it to the big leagues. Worse, most kids who play sports before high school never play on their high school team.

So concentrating on developing your child's natural talent for a sport in the hopes of helping him become an elite athlete is seldom a winning hand. As we've seen in Chapter 2, there are so many other advantages to participating in sports that have nothing to do with becoming a professional athlete.

But there is a much more important reason to avoid focusing on talent – it can actually harm your child's ability to succeed, in sports and life.

The Growth Mindset

Focusing on talent can be a trap.

Carol Dweck of Stanford University, author of *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, has identified two different mindsets that possess enormous implications for sports parents.

The first is the “fixed mindset,” in which one sees one's ability as set. Either you are talented athletically or you aren't. Either you are smart or you aren't. This mindset is a dead-end because whether you succeed or not is determined by something totally outside your control.

The other is the “growth mindset.” You believe in your ability to grow and improve, regardless of where you start. This is a wonderful thought for any child: “I can get smarter (or better at learning a foreign language or excelling in a sport or...) if I work hard at it.”

If your child does something well, either on the playing field or in the classroom, Dweck's research offers clear guidance on how to respond.

For example, you might say, “*Wow, that was a great play. You are really good!*” This focus on talent reinforces a fixed mindset and the idea that the child has little or no control over his development. A tough challenge in the future then becomes even tougher because talented people aren't supposed to be stumped by a challenge.

On the other hand, you could say, “*Wow, that was a great play. You've really been working hard and it's paying off.*” This reinforces a growth mindset that her good play is a result of her effort, which will more likely cause her to try harder in the future when faced with a challenge that stymies her initially.

It's All about Effort

Whenever you can, stress to your child how important effort is in helping people improve and learn. Avoid attributing any success your child has to his talent (or intelligence, for that matter) to avoid the talent trap. You can use

“You’re-the-Kind-of-Person-Who” statements to reinforce the growth mindset in times of failure and success:

- **Failure:** “I know you must be disappointed (that you missed a key shot, or that you didn’t get selected for the lead role in the play), but one of the things I admire about you is that *you’re the kind of person who* bounces back and keeps trying until you succeed.”
- **Success:** “I was excited to see your improved play. I think you’re getting better because *you’re the kind of person who* works at something until you improve.”

Attributing Your Success

Similarly, you can reinforce a growth mindset with your child when you talk about your own work and accomplishments. I remember times when I solved some problem that had long been vexing me or came up with some idea that I thought was especially clever. I sometimes would say to myself, often in front of my son Gabriel, “I am so smart!”

Now Gabriel is grown and a successful writer with a robust growth mindset, but I realize I would have done better by him if I had said in those times of triumph, “I worked so hard and it paid off in this good idea!”

Developing the Potential of Your Child

A 1985 study led by Benjamin Bloom, *Developing Talent in Young People*, examined children who evidenced talent at an early age in art, music, mathematics, and sport (swimmers and tennis players).

Bloom asserts that there are a lot more potentially talented youth than you might think, as many as 95 percent of all youth. He also concluded that it is hard to identify talent at a young age. Only 10 percent or fewer of the talented athletes could be confidently identified as gifted by the age of 11 or 12. One coach didn’t recognize how talented a swimmer was even after working with her for five years.

I think this reinforces Dweck’s thesis. Perhaps it’s hard to identify talent early on because you always can’t tell who is going to work hard over time to develop their ability.

Bloom’s study offers some specific “best practices” for sports parents.

Provide encouragement: Bloom concluded that as many as 95 percent of all children have the ability to approximate the achievements of talented youth with proper encouragement. The ones who achieved great things felt a sense of “unconditional commitment.” “So far as we can tell, this willingness to give encouragement and support on the part of the parents (and siblings) is one of the major distinctions between the families of these Olympic swimmers and other families.” In Chapter 6 we will address how regularly filling a child’s “Emotional Tank” can encourage him to achieve his potential.

Model the behavior you want to see: A difference between talented and other children was the example set by the parents who told their children that the sky was the limit: “...the message they passed on to their children was ‘you can do anything you set your mind to, if you want to do it... (and) if you work at it.’”

Parents “...encouraged...their children to be disciplined and responsible, and by their own example around the house showed how being disciplined and responsible paid off.”

Look for a positive first coach: Enjoyment is important at every step of an athletic career, but it is absolutely essential in the beginning. A positive first coach is crucial.

- “Early coaches were not usually technically expert, but they were great encouragers and enthusiastic about the sport.”
- “Perhaps the major quality...was that they made the initial learning very pleasant and rewarding.” They gave lots of positive reinforcement, and only rarely were they critical of the child.
- “...they did set standards and expected the child to make progress, although this was largely done with approval and praise.”

Manage the transition: Bloom divided the careers of talented young people into three stages, what we’ll call the **Romantic**, the **Technical**, and the **Mature** stages.

In the Romantic Stage, the child just loves to play the game. She can’t wait to get outside and kick the ball or play catch or jump in the pool.

If the child does well relative to peers, at a certain point, someone – often a parent, but sometimes a recruiting coach – decides the child needs a technically proficient coach, who is brought into the picture to ensure that things are done correctly.

The transition to the Technical Stage is fraught with danger. As the focus moves to technical proficiency, all too often the sport becomes more like a job and less like a wonderful, fun experience. The joy evaporates and the child removes herself from the sports experience as soon as she is able, never reaching the Mature Stage where she is performing at a high level in high school, college, or beyond.

Bloom notes that most kids with talent never make it to the Mature Stage. Why? As we saw earlier, partly because they have lost the joy in playing, which powers the commitment and effort needed to become great.

So it's your primary job to monitor his sports experience to ensure that fun remains part of it through every stage. *No one else is going to have your child's interest at heart the way you do.* Here are some suggestions:

- ❑ Ensure your child has a coach who makes sports fun while teaching skills and strategy. Before signing your child up for a team, ask the coach if he has been trained and certified as a Double-Goal Coach who teaches life lessons through sports while preparing to win on the scoreboard.
- ❑ Manage your child's transition to the Technical stage. Don't allow peer pressure to cause you to enroll your child in a sports experience too intensive for his age, such as playing one sport year round at a young age or playing so many games his enthusiasm wanes.
- ❑ Model what you want to see. Be physically active and share how much you enjoy sweating and working hard. (If you aren't physically active, it's never too late!) Make the same connection with your work. Talk often about the joy of working hard to accomplish something.

10 Years and 10,000 Hours

A study by K. A. Ericsson concluded that it takes an individual 10 years and 10,000 hours of deliberate practice to become an elite athlete. If a youth athlete is not enjoying his sport, he will never stick with it to the point of accumulating the 10,000 hours of deliberate practice time needed to reach the Mature Stage.

The important lesson here is that sports parents need to manage the transition to ensure their child isn't rushed into the Technical Stage. More and more youth athletes at younger and younger ages are playing on year-round travel teams that play so many games that the wonder and joy of playing can be lost.

A child expected to "work" at the sport too soon is more likely to turn off and never reach the Mature Stage. A too-early focus on technique can drain the enjoyment that fuels the drive for excellence.

Chapter 4 Take-Aways

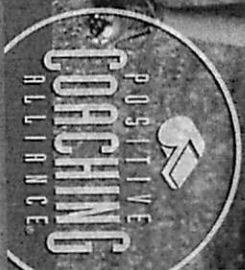
- 1 Focusing on a child's athletic talent rather than effort is a trap that can actually harm her ability to reach her potential. It's hard to predict who will be successful in sports because you can't always tell who is going to work hard over time to develop their ability.
- 2 Foster a "growth mindset" in your child, with a focus on effort and improvement. This will help your child recognize that success in sports and other activities depends more on how hard he works than on his talent.
- 3 As your child ages, make sure to manage the transition from the Romantic Stage (focus on fun) to the Technical Stage (focus on doing it right). Leaving the Romantic Stage too early can make sports feel more like a job and less like a fun experience. Your child must have a love for the game to put in the hard work over time to get really good at it. A positive coach is important at every age, but it is especially important in an athlete's early years.

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