

“The Best Kind of Ownership”

One of the best-paying professions is getting ahold of pieces of country in your mind, learning their smell and their moods, sorting out the pieces of a view, deciding what grows there and there and why, how many steps that hill will take, where that creek winds and where it meets the other one below, what elevation timberline is now, whether you can walk this reef at low tide or have to climb around, which contour lines on a map mean better cliffs or mountains. This is the best kind of ownership, and the most permanent.

It feels good to say “I know the Sierra” or “I know Point Reyes.” But of course you don’t – what you know better is yourself, and Point Reyes and the Sierra have helped. – Terry and Renny Russell, On The Loose

For many of us, youth sports before junior high or high school were neighborhood games of hide-and-seek, sardines, capture the flag and seasonal variations on the major sports – touch football, h-o-r-s-e, stickball, runners up. Every aspect of those endeavors was ours to control – each of us commissioner, owner, coach, player, umpire and fan.

Along the way we usually learned something about whatever game we were playing. But mostly we were learning about life. Choosing how much physical, social and emotional investment we would make to be first to kick-the-can, working through issues of fair play and sportsmanship on a close play in a kickball game, deciding whether or not to cheat at Marco Polo. In the end, these games had quite an impact in terms of developing a **“stronger, more responsible, confident and independent person who will be successful in life.”**

Is that impact disappearing as sports for kids become increasingly organized and adult-directed? It doesn’t have to. That quote, from Positive Coaching Alliance founder Jim Thompson, was used to describe what should be a fundamental and intentional purpose of *organized* youth sports, just as it happened in the less structured games in the neighborhood.

A critical element in this process relates to ownership and control. What follows are some thoughts, from Thompson and others, about how to sort that out to the athletes’ greatest and most permanent benefit. So they can “get ahold” of their piece of the country. While directed at how parents can effectively help their children grow from the youth sports experience, coaches may find a few helpful ideas as well:

Understanding Expectations: Dr. Bruce Brown directs the NAIA’s “Champions of Character Program”. He recommends that each season parents consider the following questions: Why do I want my child playing? What will be a successful season for me as a parent? What are my goals for him? What do I hope he gains from the experience? What do I think his role will be on the team?

Once you have done that, find a quiet time to discuss the the same questions with your young athlete. Ideally, the answers will be in sync with yours. If they are not, you’ll have to decide whose expectations the athlete will be asked to pursue.

Not all athletes on a team are likely to have the same goals. Some players may be dreaming of playing on a top college team. Others are there just because they want to be with their friends. That's OK, too, so long as the player's commitment to a team contains an obligation to helping teammates attain their dreams.

With a little help, athletes figure this out early on. They then freely choose to make efforts that honor the goals and aspirations of their teammates – even where those goals are much loftier than their own. It's important that parents honor and support this commitment, even if their son or daughter isn't one of those hoping to play at a Division I school or on the National Team.

It's "Her Thing". Recognizing this is the first step toward "releasing" the athlete to the game and the team. It's not always an easy thing to do. Dr. Bruce Brown:

One of the best "gifts" parents can give their children is to release them to their sport. As such, during the season, parents must share their child with the coach and the team. The earlier in their child's career they are able to do this, the better it is for their children's development and growth.

By releasing their young athlete, parents are telling their children that all successes are theirs, all failures are theirs, and all problems are theirs. There are not many places in a young person's life where parents can say, "This is your thing." This can't be done with friends, academics, decisions on weekends, or even movies; it can be done in athletics.

The dilemma for most adults is that it is easy for them to see "solutions" in athletic situations and too painful for adults to let their children find their own solutions. On the other hand it is both necessary and helpful to allow children to work their own ways out of troubling dilemmas. No downside exists for allowing a young athlete to take a risk and fail in a game or practice. If young athletes are going to develop into intelligent, instinctive individuals, it is critical that they are given the opportunity to solve their own problems... (This gives them) an enhanced chance to grow in a meaningful way.

University of North Carolina coach Anson Dorrance, citing the parents of Julie Foudy, Michelle Akers, Mia Hamm, Tisha Venturini and others, puts it a little differently:

In my experience, the best soccer parents more or less let their children do their own thing. These parents are not directly involved in their children's soccer, especially not as part of a "management team". They are completely supportive of their players – win, lose or draw. The bottom line – they fulfill the parent's role and job, which is basically to love their children... Parents who learn to have faith in their children learn to let go of their desire to control and protect... I know it can be hard, but a player has to fight her own battles. If sports can have any value off the field, it is in the athletes dealing with these difficult, but ultimately empowering challenges on their own.

He goes on to advise the athlete:

The first step in a healthy soccer career is to become your own manager. The more you can do about your game on your own, the more you are playing for yourself. And the more you play for yourself, the less you will require of your parents and the more freedom you will have to pursue something you enjoy for its own sake. You want (your parents) to enjoy watching you be challenged and enjoying that world, but it is your world to manage.

When An Athlete feels in control of his sports experience, interesting things happen. Research by Robert Roeser and Albert Bandura at Stanford support the Positive Coaching model. That model helps each athlete to take ever-increasing responsibility for his own effort, learning and improvement. When this happens, the research shows that the athlete will have greater self-confidence, and that one with higher self-confidence works harder and sticks to the task longer. Who wouldn't want that?

On Teams Where expectations are clear and athletes control their performance, ownership is vested where it belongs – with the athletes who are making their personal investments in their team. They develop a “we play for each other” mentality which continually reinforces itself. That may be the most important quality a team can enjoy.

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Resources and Further Reading:

Anson Dorrance: **The Vision of a Champion** (notably Chapter 11)

website: www.ncgsc.com/lect

Bruce Eamon Brown: **Teaching Character Through Sport**

website: www.proactivecoaching.info

Jim Thompson: **Positive Coaching**.

website: www.positivecoach.org.