

When parents cross the line

By **Craig Smith**

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*Trouble often follows for athletes and coaches when over-involved **parents cross the line** from encouragement to interference. Bruce Brown's message: Release your kids to the game.*

KIRKLAND — When someone asks lecturer Bruce Brown where he got all his insight into issues of adolescent sports, he has a five-word answer:

"It's stuff kids told me."

And he listened carefully during a 30-plus-year career as a coach of boys and girls in a variety of sports.

Brown, 55, is athletic director at Northwest College in Kirkland and a national speaker for the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) and its "Champions of Character" program.

He speaks nationally on a variety of athletic topics, but in the Northwest, he most often is asked to speak on the touchy issue of parental roles in kids athletics.

"I'm not here to help psycho **parents** who jump out of the stands and attack umpires," he tells audiences. "I'm here for the normal **parents** who want to be part of good memories."

Brown's major message is that **parents** need to "release their kids to the game" and get out of the way once any safety concerns are satisfied.

"Athletics is one of the best places for young people to take risks and fail," Brown said.

Brown did most of his coaching in the Bellevue and Lake Washington school districts and has a special fondness for junior-high kids. At Inglewood, Hyak and other junior highs where he taught and coached, he would spend his lunch hour sitting in gyms munching on sandwiches and supervising pickup games for players of all abilities.

Jerry Parrish, longtime football coach and athletic director at North Kitsap, is one of many Brown believers throughout the state.

"Bruce is great at hitting the nail on the head," Parrish said. "With all his experience, he's walked the talk."

After every sports season, he asked players to talk about what they had liked most and least. Over the years, he kept hearing more and more stories of parental over-involvement.

Brown said "red flags" that a parent is too involved are:

1) **Parents** who share the credit for their child's accomplishments; 2) **Parents** who continue to coach after the athlete knows more about the sport than the parent; 3) An athlete who avoids a parent after a game; 4) When the game's outcome means more to a parent than to the athlete; 5) **Parents** who try to solve problems best left to the team and players.

Brown encourages **parents** to ask their sons or daughters these questions before a season starts: 1) Why are you playing? 2) What is a successful season? 3) What goals do you have? 4) What do you think your role will be on the team?

He encourages **parents** to ask themselves the same questions, plus this one: "What do you as a parent hope they gain from the experience?"

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"If your answers are different from theirs, you need to drop yours and accept theirs," he said.

For example, if an athlete is playing basketball because she likes the sport and enjoys being part of the team, trouble is inevitable if the parents' chief objective is to win a college scholarship.

One of Brown's bedrock messages is that **parents** must realize that athletes need "time and space" after a game.

"And the more emotional the game was, the more time and space they need," he said.

He said youngsters told him they dreaded "the ride home" after a game because a parent, usually the father, would critique the game and their performance.

Brown said he found one high-school boy in the team locker room nearly two hours after a basketball game had ended.

"I never go home until my father goes to sleep," the boy said.

Brown said he hates to hear a kid say, "I don't want my **parents** at the game" because the youngster "really wants them there in the worst way" but has concerns about behavior during or after the game.

The coach-parent relationship can be a delicate one, and Brown said there are "appropriate" and "inappropriate" subjects for **parents** to discuss with coaches.

Appropriate ones are mental and physical treatment of the child, ways to help the child improve and any concerns about the athlete's behavior.

The inappropriate subjects are playing time, strategy and other team members.

As a coach, Brown said he had one commandment for his players: "Don't let your teammates down."

That meant everything from don't loaf at practice to don't do dumb things off the field that could get you suspended.

Brown is quick to remind everyone — players, **parents** and athletes — that the only guarantee in a sport season is that "it won't be perfect."

"Even if there aren't problems among player, **parents** and coach, there are going to be problems with relationships on the team, problems with playing time and problems with individual and team success," he said.

Brown said one of his favorite appearances was a preseason meeting with **parents** and players on a highly touted, senior-laden high-school girls basketball team with high expectations.

He immediately sensed problems brewing concerning playing time and expectations. The girls seemed to be greeting the season with anxiety not enthusiasm.

Brown reminded everyone in the room that the season was supposed to be fun and an adventure for the girls. He told the **parents** they may not be grasping how much pressure they were putting on the girls.

"When I was done, the senior girls all gave me a group hug," he said.

Brown has coached football, basketball, baseball and volleyball. His fourth book, "101 Drills for Youth Basketball Coaches," just came out, and he has produced seven instructional coaching videos, five of them about basketball. He has coached boys and girls and has five daughters.

Brown maintains that four factors lead kids away from a sport: Continuous losing, negative coaching, outside pressures or sports being made too complicated.

Brown often is asked whether athletes have changed much during his career. His answer: "very little, but the **parents** have changed dramatically."

Reasons: Scholarship-mania, parental investment of sometimes thousands of dollars for sports tutors and select teams, poor role models in pro sports and the quest for media coverage.

"The number of **parents** who **cross** the **line** of support and encouragement to interference has increased," he said.

Brown said some **parents** are getting the message. He said fathers have come up to him after his presentation and declared, "I blew it with my first two kids. I'm going to get it right this time with No. 3."