



Skilled But Passive In Games

This resource stems from a question submitted to the Ask PCA blog. Responses come from our experts including PCA Trainers, who lead live group workshops for coaches, parents, administrators and student-athletes.

“My son is one of three 7th-graders on the school’s basketball team and the only one who gets playing time, mostly due to his ball-handling skills. Even though coach keeps increasing our son’s time, he is reluctant to dribble, control the offense and take a leadership role. He is passive when he enters the game and yields to teammates’ instructions. The 8th-graders do not pass to him much and are quick to criticize his mistakes. Is this just part of an adjustment period or is he losing confidence and his love of the game?”

PCA Response by Joe Scally, PCA Trainer

Your description of your son’s situation reminded me of Derrick Rose, the Chicago Bulls All-Star point guard. As you may know, his high school team won two state championships, he led his University of Memphis team to the NCAA championship game as a freshman, and he was Rookie of the Year with the Bulls. Yet, in his first year with the Bulls he seemed reluctant to take charge or assume the role of “go to player.” He often was on the bench in the fourth quarter. Now in his third year he is the acknowledged team leader who worked hard over the last two years to develop an outside shot to go with his already excellent passing and driving ability.

It is a frequent scenario in sports where a talented younger player comes to a veteran team and needs time to acclimate to the team dynamics and the higher level of competition. The younger player may need to develop skills that were not fully polished or not required at lower levels. As the player’s comfort level grows he or she will increasingly find ways to assert leadership. Your son seems to be in that adjustment period

He must be doing some things well to get increasing amounts of playing time. His confidence will improve with his success in this new situation. If he were losing his love of the game you might see other signs, such as reluctance to go to practices or games, less interest in watching basketball or playing in informal settings, complaining about treatment from coaches or teammates, or consistently giving less effort. The best way to assess this is to ask your son. If his adjustment is challenging, encourage him to stick with it and do his best. If he has difficulty with his teammates’ criticisms, talk to him about how to deal with those. If you think the coach can help, talk to your son about how he can approach the coach to discuss his role on the team.

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Skilled But Passive in Games, continued

Your son's taking responsibility for these discussions will help him acquire a skill that will benefit him in many ways. Most importantly, unless the situation is extreme or is damaging to your son, give him the room to navigate this challenge in his own way. By doing so, he will have the opportunity to learn many valuable life lessons. As PCA's National Spokesperson Phil Jackson has said, "There's more to life than basketball. In fact, there's more to basketball than basketball."

PCA Trainer Joe Scally is a longtime youth soccer coach based in the Chicago area. He spent several years as PCA's national director of training.

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