

3

CHAPTER THREE

Understanding the High School Sports Landscape

The transition to high school can be jarring for teenagers. After having figured out a place for themselves in elementary and middle school, they now have to do it all over again, at what seems like much higher stakes.

The transition is also often a challenge for high school parents. Teenagers are changing rapidly and trying out new ways to relate to their parents as they move steadily and/or tentatively toward independence. And if your child is or aspires to be a high school athlete, there is a whole other set of challenges to negotiate.

What Parents Need to Know About High School Sports

PCA tapped its network of coaches, athletic directors, and parents to identify what high school sports parents need to know to help athletes thrive in high school sports. Here are four big ideas to help you understand your athlete's challenges and what you can do to help your teen thrive.

- 1) High school sports involves a *lot* of time and effort.
- 2) High school athletes are smack in the middle of a transition to adulthood.
- 3) High school sports programs have a chain of authority.
- 4) High school sports is a very public stage.

1) High School Sports Involves a Lot of Time and Effort

High school athletes are *busy!*

Balancing schoolwork, sports, friends, maybe a girlfriend or boyfriend, possibly a job all the while wondering about their future can frazzle even the most well-adjusted teen.

Sports alone can demand 12 to 20 hours per week for four months or more per sport. Imagine adding more than two workdays to your work schedule, and you will get the idea of what a high school sports commitment is like for a teen.

Plus, practicing is hard physical work. It takes a lot of energy – physical and emotional – to compete in sports, which can leave a teen athlete drained when she comes home.

What Can Parents Do?

Help your athlete plan and set priorities. Setting priorities and managing scarce time well is not something that comes naturally to most people. Help your teen develop these important life skills.

Before each sport season, sit down together to take a look at what is on his plate. Start first with academics (partly to signal how much you value learning). Help him map out the time he'll need to handle the demands of homework and sports so he'll have a better sense of how much time is available for other activities.

Encourage him to make two lists – a “to do list” and a “don't-do list.” In setting priorities, saying no is often more important than saying yes.

Don't allow shortcuts in sleep and nutrition. Many high school athletes try to manage their heavy work load by sleeping less and eating on the run (usually junk food). Neither of these helps a student-athlete, especially those undergoing huge growth spurts. In fact, student-athletes need *more* sleep and *better* diets. Make sure your son or daughter has nutritious meals and snacks. And insist on them being in bed at a decent hour so they get the 9.25 hours

of sleep they need according to the National Sleep Foundation. Make sure your athlete understands that she will *perform better* if she eats and sleeps properly.

Encourage building in “down time.” Just like muscles grow when they have rest between weight lifting sessions, your teen needs some down time to just chill, relax, do nothing, hang out, read for pleasure, or listen to music. Encourage him to build in time to do nothing.

Give your athlete a break. She will undoubtedly get tired and cranky at times. She may procrastinate. That’s normal, so don’t overreact and make a big problem out of what may be a transitory thing.

Don’t panic if there is a crash. Sometimes, despite all preventive measures, the combination of athletics, academics, and extracurriculars overwhelm student-athletes, often in the middle of a season. Pulled between various pressures, teens can get stretched to a breaking point.

If this occurs, recognize that it’s not unusual. Help your teen consider options for remedying it. Most often, improving time management, reassessing priorities, and self-advocacy is the answer. But sometimes, in extreme circumstances, your athlete may need to ask for greater flexibility from her coaches or teachers, who can allow a day off from practice or extend a deadline.

2) High School Athletes Are Smack in the Middle of a Transition to Adulthood

Many parents forget from time to time that their teen is going through a big transition. Adolescence is a time of individuating, separation, and transition into adulthood. Developing independence is a natural process that should be nurtured, even though it can be difficult for parents who feel they are losing the little guy or gal that relied on them for so much.

Parents accustomed to coaching and managing the off-field affairs for the child’s youth sports teams must now adjust to sitting in the stands and watching other people coach and run the athletic program. The parent is no longer in the driver’s seat.

The good news is that sports is an ideal “practice arena” for teens to begin to flex their independence – and a great place for you to practice letting go. High school sports provides a chance to determine how seriously they want to pursue their sport(s), set their own goals and plan to achieve those goals, and learn to advocate appropriately for their own interests with their coaches and teammates.

Unfortunately, some parents lose sight of the importance of this transition, and sports instead becomes an unpleasant power struggle.

What Can Parents Do?

Encourage independence *and* the responsibility that goes with it.

You do your teen no favors by micromanaging his affairs and making decisions for him. Instead, make him responsible for his athletic life. Allow him to choose what sports to play and the goals he wants to achieve. Give him greater responsibility for the accompanying logistics, be it washing uniforms, arranging rides, or fixing his own meals for trips.

Respect your athlete’s choices. High school sports may present difficult choices for teens: Continue with a sport or quit? Specialize or play multiple sports? Play on the club team or high school team or both? Make the sacrifices necessary to earn a varsity letter or college scholarship? Listen to my coach or my dad? The answers to many of these questions go to the heart of a parent-child relationship.

Many parents invest so much time, effort, and money into their child’s sports experience that they become heavily invested in these decisions. When a parent’s sports aspirations conflict with those of their athlete, both parties can get hurt. As the adult, you may need to surrender your sport’s dreams.

Help your athlete make her own educated decisions. This may require her to do research, list pros and cons, and talk with people she trusts. But, in the end, your teen will be better equipped for impending adulthood by making her own decisions.

Just listen. One of the greatest gifts you can give your athlete is to listen to her, especially when she is struggling. Managing a demanding schedule and

increased responsibility can be daunting for high school athletes. And when they struggle, parents often aren't the first people they turn to for comfort – their peers are. Nonetheless, it's important for parents to “be there” for them.

Communicate unconditional support. High school is a time when teens are trying to prove themselves – to themselves, to their peer group, to the larger world. If they feel they also have to prove themselves to their parents, it will add unneeded pressure. Be explicit: “You don't have to be a great athlete or a great student because you are already a great person in my book.” Repeat it throughout your teen's high school years. Whether she shows it or not, this will have a positive impact.

3. High School Sports Programs Have a Chain of Authority

Most high school sports' programs have a set chain of authority for resolving problems. Often the biggest problems in high school sports occur when parents circumvent the chain of authority, overstep their bounds to rectify a perceived problem or inequity (usually involving concerns about coaching strategy and/or their son or daughter's playing time), or poison the water by venting their concerns to other parents or athletes, including their own child.

To be sure, there may be times when teams under-perform, athletes are under-utilized by a coach, or the sports experience is less than ideal. These things happen, and that's unfortunate. But the larger issue is how you respond to your athlete's concerns – or your own concerns – in these situations. (Chapter 9 offers detailed advice on how to respond to specific problems.)

What can parents do?

Assume good will. Just like you, most coaches and athletic programs want what's best for your athlete.

Recognize who's in charge. This may be hard for you to accept, but you are not in charge of your child's high school sports experience. She is. Be supportive and helpful, but don't take over for her. Sports offers a great chance

for your teen to learn responsibility. Don't waste the opportunity by taking over when there's a perceived problem.

Realize that coaches have to balance competing needs. Coaches must do what they think is best for a dozen or more players. On a team, the “pie” is limited and the coach cannot give every family everything it may want. Every player cannot play shortstop, quarterback, or point guard. The team concept requires give-and-take and mutual sacrifice for the sake of the whole.

Help your athlete learn to advocate for himself. If your teen complains about the coach, teammates, his playing time, or his role on the team, encourage him to think about how he wants to deal with it. Tell him you'll be happy to listen to him if he wants to talk about what he might do. You can even role-play how he might approach the coach, for example, if he wants to get more playing time.

Don't make derogatory comments about the coach to your teen or other parents or members of the team. Sadly, undermining coaches behind their backs is rampant in high school sports. This toxic behavior can devastate team culture, divide a team, and place high school athletes in an awkward middle between coach and parent. If you don't like the coach, keep it to yourself and don't poison the water.

If there's an issue you think may warrant intervening, proceed sensibly. There are some situations – physical or emotional abuse, for example – where you may decide you need to step in. (Note: Your child playing less than you would like is not a reason to intervene.) Here are some guidelines for intervening.

- a. Don't intervene when you are angry or in emotional e-mails. Wait to cool down before you contact a coach or athletic director. Inflammatory e-mails do great damage. Assume that everything you write in an e-mail will be seen by exactly the people you don't want to see it.
- b. Get all the information you can before you act. Don't assume you know what is going on, and don't assume your child's portrayal is the only or “true” one.

- c. Consult with your athlete on your plans. Many athletes are horrified to learn that their parent intervened with a coach. It is crucial that you don't act in a way that undercuts or embarrasses your teen.
- d. Act as if everyone is operating out of good will, even if you suspect they are not.
- e. Figure out what success is before you act. Too often parents act out of emotion without knowing what they want to happen. Make sure you have an answer to the question, "What do you want to happen?" if you are asked.
- f. Follow the chain of authority. Go to the coach first, even if you think he is the problem. You will ultimately get better results with the athletic director if you start with the coach. Similarly, the athletic director should always be contacted before an issue is brought to the principal or assistant principal.

4) High School Sports is a Very Public Stage

Athletes sometimes play in front of thousands of fans, and the press frequently covers high school sporting events. Colleges scout high schools for recruits. Athletes learn quickly that high school sports seem to matter more than youth sports.

Because of this public nature of high school sports, winning and "doing well" can become too important for athletes. The pressure to specialize, get private coaching, attend expensive camps, or purchase the best equipment becomes greater on athletes and parents at this level.

For athletes, this means that how they do on the field of play may result in extraordinary status rewards or awful public embarrassment (amplified by the experience of adolescence). It also means that adults – parents, coaches, and other community members – can get a little crazy from time to time and lose perspective.

Stress on student-athletes can push them to poor decisions. Athletes may be tempted to cheat or take shortcuts. They may lose sight of the fact that they

are playing a game that should be fun rather than a high-stakes pressure cooker. Most seriously, steroid use and eating disorders are an unfortunate reality of high school athletics – a sign of the pressures kids are under. (See accompanying tables on Steroids and Eating Disorders on page 20.)

What can parents do?

Maintain a Second-Goal focus at all times. The scoreboard does matter, but not as much as the life lessons sports can teach. Keep your focus on life lessons, rather than measuring your teen's athletic success based on on-field performance. Knowing that someone loves and supports them no matter how they perform is huge, especially for developing teens.

Focus on your teen's effort rather than the outcome. Later in Chapter 5, I'll discuss the importance of encouraging a "growth mindset" with your athlete. For now, I'll just say that your expectations for your teen should be that she gives her best shot, not that she will succeed in everything.

Help your athlete keep sports in proper perspective. Adolescents can exaggerate the importance of success or failure. Encourage them to enjoy the moment and to periodically refocus on the big picture. In the final analysis, virtually all high school sports results will be forgotten by everyone but those who participated.

Keep the lines of communication open. Let your teen vent about things that stress him out. It's not helpful for him to keep it bottled up. Make opportunities to be alone with your athlete – in the car, around the dinner table, on a hike – to listen to his feelings about his sports experiences.

Get professional help if needed. If you think your athlete may be using performance enhancing drugs or suffering from an eating disorder, it's better to be safe than sorry. Ask your doctor or friends for the name of a counselor who has helped others in your teen's situation.

Signs of Eating Disorders

- Preoccupation with weight or body
- Constant dieting, even when skinny
- Making excuses not to eat
- Going to the bathroom right after meals
- Taking diet pills or laxatives
- Eating in secret, at night, or alone
- Hoarding high calorie food
- Compulsive exercising
- Avoiding social settings that include food
- Obsession with food, calories, nutrition

Signs of Steroid Use

- Fast weight and muscle gains connected to a weight training program
- Aggressiveness, combative behavior
- Jaundice (yellow skin)
- Red or purple spots on the body
- Oily skin and severe acne breakouts
- Constant unpleasant breath
- Trembling
- Swelling of lower legs and feet

The Bright Side

This chapter paints a pretty stressful picture of what high school can be like for an athlete, but high school can be a glorious time of growth and change for a young person. It can be a time that he will remember fondly forever.

This is much more likely to happen if you understand your supporting role and play it to the hilt, which is exactly what I wish for you and your athlete.

Chapter 3 Take-Aways

- 1 High school sports involve a lot of time and effort. Athletes can become unduly stressed by social, academic, and athletic pressures. Parents can help by assisting in setting priorities, making sure kids get enough sleep and good nutrition, and encouraging down-time.
- 2 High school athletes are in the middle of a transition to adulthood. Sports provide an ideal “practice arena” for teens to practice independence and a great place for parents to practice letting go.
- 3 High school sports programs have a well-defined chain of authority. Parents create problems when they circumvent it when a concern or perceived inequity arises. Parents are best served to help athletes advocate for themselves.
- 4 High school sports is a very public stage. The pressure to win on the scoreboard can bring out the worst in coaches, parents, and athletes. Parents can help by maintaining a Second-Goal focus on the life lessons sports offer and encouraging effort over results.

THE HIGH SCHOOL SPORTS PARENT

Developing Triple-Impact Competitors



By Jim Thompson



BETTER ATHLETES
BETTER PEOPLE

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