

GROWING CHAMPIONS FOR LIFE

Positive Strategies for Helping Kids Win at Life and Sports

Would a Mentor Put Your Athlete on the Fast Track?

By David Benzel



Is there a difference between a COACH and a MENTOR?

What are the benefits of having both?

How can I put my athlete on the fast track to higher achievement?

If you are a sports Mom or Dad trying to set your athlete up for success, you might have pondered these questions. In fact, wondering if you are “doing all that you can,” is par for the course.

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Since the terms coach and mentor are sometimes used interchangeably, it might get confusing.

The truth is, every mentor IS a coach, but NOT every coach is a mentor.

If you are fortunate enough to have a coach that has stepped into the role of mentoring your athlete, then consider yourself blessed – it is a rare combination. The nature of the coaching role makes it difficult to do both and so it is not the norm.

Let's first take a closer look at the 3 main distinctions between coaching and mentoring – then it will be easier to identify the criteria to look for in a possible mentor for your athlete.

1) Focus

Coaching is task-focused. Teaching an athlete the sport-specific techniques and skills required for her sport is the primary job of a coach. She will concentrate on getting the athletes on the team physically ready for the next competition. A successful coach not only has knowledge of her sport but she also is intentional about how to creatively train all her athletes.

Mentoring is relationship-focused. Self-confidence, healthy habits, and a fresh perspective can have a crucial impact on athletic performance. These are the kinds of issues that a mentor might address as they spend one-on-one time with their mentee. He is focused on developing a safe space for your athlete to share some of the challenges they might have personally.

2) Duration

Coaching is usually for a specific and short-term period of time. Most often in youth sports, coaches work with an athlete for one season. Once your child is in high school, they might have the same coach for all four years in a particular sport. But this is not always guaranteed. Usually, once the season is over the coach and athlete have minimal, if any, contact.

Mentoring is for a long-term period of time. To develop trust between a mentor and mentee, it requires time. Mentors want to get to know a mentee on a personal level, and

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that usually happens over the course of a year and beyond. It is not confined to only when the athlete is participating on a sports team.

3) Interest

A coach is most interested in performance. She might look at an athlete and see that a particular skill set needs to be enhanced. Or in some cases, she might have to help the child actually acquire a new skill. In either case, her interest lies in getting all athletes performing at their best.



A mentor is most interested in development. Growing and developing an athlete as a person involves looking at life lessons that can be learned during sports participation. Mentors recognize that there is more at stake than just one competition or one particular season. Thanks to the relationship they have with an athlete they can speak into a broader context.

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Finding a Mentor That Is the Right Fit

It's easy to see that a mentor can fill in a lot of gaps in an athlete's journey – areas that most coaches don't have the bandwidth for.

Although you don't usually get to choose a coach, you can and should choose a mentor.

Who does your son/daughter look up to in their sport?

It could be an older athlete on the team that seems to have his act together balancing homework and practices.

Perhaps your neighbor excelled in your child's sport and enjoys giving him insider tips on how to handle pre-race jitters.

A past coach that really seemed to connect with your daughter might be the perfect fit as she is trying to become more competitive.

Finally, collegiate family members or friends are also a great resource and may be open to a mentoring relationship.

As you encourage your child to seek out a mentor, keep in mind these 4 criteria:

- Has some amount of success in the sport your child participates in
- Makes mature life decisions
- Moral character is strong
- Evidence of deeper wisdom

Bringing It All Together

A good mentor can bring a lot to the table for your aspiring athlete.

Not only will your child be able to learn about the subtle nuances of participating in their sport but mentors use the sports platform to share their experience and wisdom about many of life's lessons.

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