

## A FATHER'S COVENANT

(To his current and future sons and daughters)

Jack (8), Dublin (6), Finn (4) and Savannah (1) Keating, I'm writing this piece while you are all young. I have been coaching for a long time now and have seen the good, the bad and the ugly in youth sports. As you may know I played soccer for a long time; my first toy that I can remember was a yellow and black plastic soccer ball and for my third birthday I got a soccer jersey from a professional club. I played for my school starting at age 6. I started club soccer at age 8. I played both school and club soccer all the way through to college and in my last few years of high school I played in men's leagues and eventually in the South African professional league (NPSL). I had to leave home to escape conscription (forced to fight) in the apartheid army and came to America and played college soccer. Then I started coaching and the real learning began. I've learned a lot about adults and children through coaching, and even more about how adults treat their children when it comes to soccer. Some of it is not so great and some of it is exactly how it should be done. I haven't encouraged you to play soccer yet and probably won't but there is a fair chance that you will ask to play sometime starting soon and I'll let you (but you can't get cleats until you've played at least a year or more). At such time I will become a 'soccer dad'. And I'll have to follow the same kind of rules that I ask other soccer parents to follow. Every day I ask parents not to be hypersensitive. This means not getting upset over things like changes (like when you get a new coach or when a training session gets rescheduled) or wins and losses (especially at State Cup) or being on a team other than the A team (in a big club like mine, can you imagine how many unhappy parents there are if only the A team parents are happy?!) I don't want to be like that. I want to make sure you hold me accountable (responsible) for being a good soccer dad so I'm going to write down some promises and make them public so that you (and your mama) can let me know if I'm doing okay as a soccer dad and remind me about my promises if I break one. So here goes (and remember, I'm going to do my best, okay?):

1. Before we ever get involved with 'organized' soccer I promise to play lots of soccer with you in the back yard

2. I promise that we will play more pick up games in the backyard (like I used to with my two brothers) than you'll ever play with an 'actual' team
3. I promise to spend time watching your coach in action before I let you play for him/her. I'll be watching to see if he kicks the ice bucket when he loses or smiles regardless of the score, yells at his players through the game or offers quiet but clear help from the sidelines, challenges you with real soccer situations in practice or sticks you in lines and runs drills for hours, makes you do cold stretches and run laps at the beginning of practice or creates excitement and energy with his first activity at practice, makes you sit and listen to long speeches after games or insists that you go and have pizza; gives you a hard time for arriving late at practice (even though it's my fault) or seems excited to see you when you arrive, arranges practices and scrimmages on Sundays or tries to keep that day free
4. I promise that we will never skip a family holiday for a soccer game, come back early from our summer vacation so that you can attend tryouts, or miss the opportunity to see relatives over Thanksgiving, Christmas and other public holidays because of a tournament.
5. I promise that if it is more fun playing on the "F" team than on the "A" team that you will play on the F team and trust me when I tell you that I'll know which team suits you best.
6. I promise that I will never lose sleep or get anxious over soccer, call other parents to discuss the coach, arrange meetings with coach to discuss your 'development' (this isn't your spiritual, emotional or academic education we're talking about after all, its a game), or spend time writing page-long emails to coach about you or 'the team'.
7. I promise not to be that unhappy parent who makes the other parents on the sideline equally unhappy. You'll find me most of the time watching your games from my chair in a quiet corner of the field wearing my i-pod, smiling at your errors and your skill. I've been where you are at, a thousand times.
8. I promise to skip MANY of your games, and in doing so show you that my life does not revolve around your (in)ability to kick a little round object filled with air around a grass field. In fact, I'll spend many of your practices and games hanging out with your mama, who arrived on the scene before you

guys, or I'll use the time to exercise myself

9. I promise to watch many of your games, especially the one's that you ask me to be at
10. I promise I'll never make a choice between paying for family needs and soccer. The former will always get paid first (sorry- you can wear your brothers' old cleats for the rest of the season)
11. I promise that I will **ground you** from soccer for a month if I ever hear you say "practice was boring", "this player on my team stinks", "I'm better than this player", or "I deserve to be on that team". This is the greatest game ever invented boys! If you need to be on an A team, need to have an overpaid coach train you, need to receive constant cheer leading to feel motivated and continue with the sport, or just *have* to be with certain friends to enjoy this beautiful game, you don't get it [and if I ever act like one of those sappy dads who spoil their children by fighting their battles for them, the kind that you hear me complain to mama about every now and then, have mama hurt me. She knows how.]
12. I promise that if you turn out to be a pretty good player, and start getting recruiting calls from other coaches and parents, that I will treat the calls the way you've heard me treat telemarketers: "*Thank you. I'm not interested. Please put me on your 'do not call' list. Have a nice day.*" I will not turn tryouts into the NBA draft, courting the superficial (fake) advances of other club coaches, shopping you around different clubs, reinforcing the illusion that you are a superstar. More important to me is your modesty and the appreciation of a good thing.
13. I promise that if I arrive at a soccer meeting and realize that your coach hasn't been invited and that parents are there to talk about him behind his back that I will voice my disapproval at this tactic and leave immediately.
14. [Scratch promise #13. I'm not going to soccer meetings. I've got better things to do with my time. Coach can email me the meeting minutes]
15. I promise you that you will play on a team where you will *play* most of the game. Again, that may be the F team boys. Soccer is meant to be played, not watched from the bench
16. I promise you that if you treat this game well, and use the gifts you are given

with humility, that the game will repay you for a lifetime. And I will try my best to leave it in your hands. I've already had my time.

Pappa- Summer 2010

John Keating