



How to be a Great Soccer Parent

By Neal Frink

I am both a parent and a coach. I stopped coaching my older son last year and now just coach the younger one. Over the past year I've been learning how to be a better parent/spectator. It ain't easy, but I'm trying. Here are a few of my thoughts on the topic.

Sit away from the field. I have been finding it easier to enjoy the game when I move my chair further from the field. The combination of being close to the action and sitting in the middle of other engaged parents produces an edgy kind of energy that all too frequently gets the best of me. When possible, I like to find a spot where I can see more of the field a nearby hill or the top row of stands if they are available. Getting a little distance provides both literal and figurative perspective. At distance, it becomes more clear that I am watching children play. At distance, I am less likely to impose the same expectations I have when I watch the EPL, Serie A, or even the MLS. It's also easier to more accurately judge whether the AR blew an off-side call AND easier not to care about it.

Cheer, but not too loudly. I recall after one of my high school soccer games asking my mother not to cheer so loudly on the sideline. The next home game, I was a little bummed when I did not see her in the crowd when the game started. After the game I found her and gave her flack for showing up late to the game. She told me she'd been there the whole time, but had stayed toward the back of the crowd so as not to embarrass me. I think that was supposed to make me feel guilty. I gave her a hug, thanked her, and said I would know where to look for her at the next game. I think a child's hearing is particularly tuned to hear his parent's voice, even over the din of the crowd. And yes, kids can find their own parents to be particularly embarrassing.

Don't coach from the sidelines. Last Sunday I was coaching my younger son's game. One of our players stripped the ball from an attacker near our end line and played it through the penalty area where it was intercepted and slammed into the back of our net. His mom's voice rang from the sideline Daniel, NOT in the middle. He came straight over to me in tears and said I know coach, I should have kicked it out of bounds. I told him it was OK, and NO, I'd rather have him not kick the ball out of bounds, we learn to balance risk and reward by playing soccer on the whole field. But he continued, coach, you don't understand, I'm not upset about THAT, I'm mad at my mother. Wow! A teachable moment for me. When I'm on the parent's sideline I need to be mindful not to undermine the coach, but more importantly not to undermine my son.

Withhold advice. Ferenc Puskas scored 84 goals in 85 international games for Hungary. On receiving honors for his soccer career, he is quoted as saying I want to thank my father for all the advice he never gave me. And his father knew something about soccer they played on the same Hungarian team when Ferenc was 16! Sometimes after a game one of my boys will ask if I will shoot on them in goal. I need to indulge them more frequently when they make that request. Perhaps, like Ferenc, they'd get more out of playing a little soccer with their old man than hearing my advice.

Ice cream! When I was a boy I got rides to most of my youth soccer games with Mr. Reiter, my teammate Eddie's dad. After every game, win or loss, Mr. Reiter would stop and treat the whole carload to ice cream. The quality and consistency of Mr. Reiter's kindness and generosity stays with me long after the memories of any of those games has faded. Now, on the way to my boys' soccer games we always scout out the UDF where we'll stop and get ice cream after the game. With a tip-of-the-hat to Mr. Reiter, it's a legacy I hope they'll each pass on to their kids.