

# Parental Interference Not Suggested

## Coaches Wary of Pushers, Screamers and Shouters

By Dan Woog, *Soccer America*

College coaches congregate and the stories reach legendary status. There is a father who, beginning in his son's freshman year of high school peppered Division I Coaches with countless letters, phone calls, faxes and emails about the young prodigy's exploits. No press clipping was too short to be photocopied, no match too minor to mention.

The parent's aggressive behavior backfired, turning most coaches off not only to him but also to his son. The player did wind up at a perennially strong team; however, within a year he left. The program was too strong. His father had gotten him into school, but he could not get him on the field.

Another tale concerns a player of similar stature—good but not great—accepted at a school several hours from home. As the young man's first fall wore on, and it became apparent he was not getting much playing time, his father began appearing at practice sessions. He soon became a permanent fixture. The freshman was mortified, but his father stayed. It was, he insisted, his right as a tuition-paying parent.

Most "parent stories" are not so gruesome. But it is clear that parental influence—or, as some coaches see it, interference—is no longer confined to Youth Soccer. It now extends into the college ranks.

The roots of parental over-involvement can be traced, college coaches say, to Youth Soccer. "College Soccer is now Youth Soccer writes large," one Division I Coach (who asked to remain anonymous) says. "It comes from the Youth Program," agrees **John Rennie** of Duke University. "Some of these parents have coached, others have just supported their kid for years. But a lot of them have come to think of college as much *their* career as the player's."

The first signs of increasing parental involvement crop up during the recruiting process. According to **Mike Berticelli**, Men's Coach at the University of Notre Dame, that is where parents can be most vocal. "I'm seeing a large percentage of initial come not from the athlete, but the mother or father," he says. "It's very obvious when a resume is put together by the parents, and run off on Dad's color copier at the office. I get a 60-page packet on a kid, and I know the same thing was sent to 52 other schools. Or I pick up the phone and a Secretary says, 'Please hold for Mr. Jones.' Well, I've never spoken to Mr. Jones before, and here he is calling about his son."

Such letters and calls send up several warning flags. One is that the players may not truly be interested in Notre Dame. When a player contacts the coach directly, he assumes the motivation is there; with a parent, the coach cannot be sure. A player who does not or will not make the initial contact may not be emotionally ready to make the jump to college. "It doesn't bode well for an 18-year old about to go off on his own if he can't even pick up the phone." Another concern is that a parent, who will do so much for his son or her son, may prove to be over-involved during the player's collegiate career as well. "I've backed off from kids to avoid a potentially difficult situation with parents," Berticelli says.

**Fran O'Leary**, Men's Head Coach at Dartmouth, has also shied away from prospects whose parents seem overzealous. As a result, he considers himself "blessed" to have no horror stories to tell. His good luck does not come from intuition alone.

According to O'Leary, "Coaches talk. We warn each other about which parents might be pushy, or screamers or shouters, which can take up so much of a coach's time and disrupt the entire team. In some cases the kid might be content to sit the first year, but the parent is pushing the kid beyond that. It's too bad for a player to miss out on a school because of a parent, but on the other hand a coach has to think of the chemistry of his team. Parents can have a big effect on that."

Berticeli sometimes hears recruits say they feel obligated to get athletic scholarships, because their parents have invested so much money into Soccer Development. "Parents don't hang it directly over a kid's head," he says, "but the kid knows his parents bought a van to take the team around or paid for all those tournament hotel rooms. Ninety-nine percent of the time parents have their kid's best interest in mind. Their heart is in the right place. They just don't know how to achieve it, or communicate it to their kid."

Such parents feel that College Soccer is a continuation of the youth experience. In fact, he says, College Soccer, beginning with recruiting-should be a time to begin separating from parents, a growth period in which players make their own decisions about academics, programs and priorities. Duke's Rennie adds, "Sometimes its almost like the parents feel they're the one who should be recruited. There's more vicarious involvement today. It's like it's a package deal, 'My son and I,' rather than 'my son'." He says the parents can play a important role by helping their son's frame legitimate issues, but parental questions are increasingly ones that players would ask: How much playing time can I expect? Where do you see me playing? What is your philosophy on the game? "It used to be that parents were involved in their kid's forty-year plan, and the kids thought short term. Now it's the parents who are only thinking four years down the road, Rennie says, "Parental involvement continues until after a player is accepted. Three years ago things got so bad at Long Island University that Arnie Ramirez inserted the following paragraph into his team's handbook: 'You are welcome to bring family members to games or to watch a practice session, as long as they will not interfere with your concentration. Family members may be very knowledgeable about the game of Soccer but we are the coaches'."

A lot of parents have coached their kids in Soccer, they got their F or D License and now they think they know everything. They say things without knowing the full story. They have no idea what went on in practice the day before." A father once complained that Ramirez did not use a player, unaware that he had just been involved in a car accident. The players are often embarrassed by family members' behavior, he adds. Ramirez has even had a wife ask why her husband was playing more. The LIU Coach told her that the man would be humiliated if he ever learned of the call. When his own child was growing up, Ramirez would never have thought of questioning a coach, despite his strong background. "It's the same way with any line of work," he says "I wouldn't interfere with one of my player's parents, and tell him how to be a banker or run his construction business. But for some reason everyone thinks its fine to tell the coach how he can run his team better."

**Joe Morrone**, who retired this fall from the University of Connecticut, shook his head sadly as he pondered the changes he has seen in nearly four decades of college coaching. "To me, college is the time for a player to learn how to deal with adults and handle adult situations, on his own. I've always tried to prepare my players for a life after college. When I see parents acting like lawyers for their sons, or interfering with the coach-player relationship, I wonder what's going to happen next. When their son graduates, gets his first job and has his first problem, what are they going to do? Call the boss and complain?"

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