

How to Raise a Champion — Chill Out

[Steve Magness](#) Mar 3, 2025

When it comes to their child's athletic pursuits, parents can go a bit crazy. They lose it on the sideline, yelling at the referee at their 8-year-old's soccer match. They stress over whether their kid is making progress and if he or she is good enough for the travel team or to make varsity. Even those who keep their cool can get swept into the march toward college scholarships, and maybe the allure of professional sport. They hire private coaches, move high schools to provide better opportunities, and go all-in, transforming their family into one dominated by soccer, baseball, football, track, or whatever the chosen path is.

It's natural to want your kids to succeed, to want the best for them. Occasionally, this behavior is a result of the parent vicariously living through their children. But more often than not, the parent's heart is in the right place. They want to support their child, to give them the best opportunity to succeed. Which is why a few recent conversations with a few former professional athletes struck me as interesting.

For instance, Lindsay Gallo observed, "My sense...is that (former elite athletes) are relatively more laid back about their young kids' athletic endeavors." Gallo was a former teammate of mine on a post-collegiate track club. She was also one of the best in the country, placing 6th at the Olympic Trials in 2008. Wouldn't you expect the parents who made it to the top themselves to be hard-charging, to give their kids the advantages they wished they had, to pass on the lessons that got them to the top?

My inclination is that those who made it to the top understand both the difficulty in doing so and the luck involved. They know that it's a long, windy path, and that in order to get through, the deep motivation and relentless drive is going to have to come from within. No amount of cajoling will help. Other former elite athletes expressed to me that there will be enough expectations and pressure on the child already, so why add more? Instead of yelling or videoing every move, they sit quietly on the sideline of their kid's games.

In fact, in my new book [Win the Inside Game](#), I outline that the high expectations, authoritarian style of parenting that we think leads to resilience, toughness, discipline and more, actually leads to the opposite. Research shows authoritarian style parenting leads to more misbehavior, worse discipline, lower levels of motivation, and an inability to regulate your emotions. As I outline in the [book](#), research shows you need a high level of support, care, and responsiveness to develop healthy, happy, motivated little human beings. It's easy to kill motivation. It's much harder to build it.

After spending over a decade in the coaching world, helping high school and college athletes excel at and continue their athletic pursuits, I got to interact with my fair share of parents. The vast majority were great. But there are a few lessons that I'd like to pass on. Parenting is difficult, and I'm not trying to say this stuff is easy. This is just one person's perspective from being on the other side. Consider it a coach's version of parental Bootcamp, lessons I wish every parent knew when it came to supporting their child's endeavors, be it athletic or academic.

1. The fire has to come from your kids. This may seem obvious, but it's worth repeating. If you look at the [research](#) on prodigies and phenoms who eventually become standout adult performers, a deep intrinsic drive is a requirement. The problem is that success often pulls us away from this inner drive. We start out playing soccer or the violin because it is interesting and fun. As we get better, we get accolades from our coaches, teachers, and others. We start winning trophies, hearing our name on the morning announcements or in the online commentary, and before we know it, we're pulled towards the external. The best way to create and maintain intrinsic motivation? Let your kids dabble, explore, and find something where their interests and talents align. Then let them enjoy it, without an undue emphasis on success.

2. Make sure your kids are doing it because they enjoy it, not because they see you enjoying it, and thus want your love and support. One pitfall I saw quite often is that kids learned that they could get mom or dad's undivided attention, love, and support when pursuing an activity. If dad was all about football, then of course little Johnny wanted to play football. When kids are young, we often confuse them doing the activity because they like it with them doing it because they know mom and dad like that they are doing it. **Kids just want to be loved, supported, and cared about.** If the only way they get that is through some sport or doing some crazy thing, they'll do it. It's great to connect with your kids

over shared interests. But like most things in life, there's a healthy balance to be had. One of Brad's parenting mantras is "love your kid, not what they are doing."

3. The car ride home is the most important part. Remember your role in your child's activities. There's no need to critique, berate, or even coach your kid up after the game. That's not your role. If after a win or loss you're always obsessing about the game, what message does the child receive? It's very easy to turn a child's passion into something they dread by ending every activity with a lecture on what they could do better. In psychology, there's a concept called the peak-end rule. It's a heuristic for how we remember past events. We tend to remember the peak of the emotional experience, maybe when you scored the game-winning goal, and the last part of it; in this case, the car ride home. Be there to support, no matter the outcome. Resist going into coaching mode. You are the parent. Leave the coaching to the coach.

4. Teach your kid how to lose well. Sports are great for teaching life lessons. A tough loss forces us to deal with our competitiveness and a swirl of negative emotions. The message shouldn't be that losing is bad; that we should ignore that experience; or that we should learn to hate losing. **Failure is a part of life. The earlier someone learns how to process, learn, and grow from failure, the better. If you see your child losing it, freaking out, unable to handle a tough loss, consider it as a sign they need perspective. (Same goes for the parents.)**

As I outline in chapter 5 of [Win the Inside Game](#), losing well is about creating space between who you are and what you do and having multiple sources of meaning in your life. This allows you to occupy a place where of course you want to get better, but it's not the end of the world if you suffer defeat. In this way you can more easily rebound and then evaluate what went wrong with a clear mind. We do our best when we are challenged, but not threatened. Don't set your kid up to be in threat mode.

5. If your kid is going to be good or even great at something, they'll figure it out. Private coaching, travel teams, and so forth aren't going to make or break your kid. If he or she is good enough to make it at the highest level, they'll get there. I know this sounds sacrilegious. To just trust that things will work out. To not spend your life obsessing over how to give someone a one-up. But we often overemphasize the minor items, blowing them up as if they are what matter most. Sure, some extra help and support are sometimes needed. But what often happens is people take advantage of a parent's desire for their child to make it, whatever "make it" means. Be wary of anyone promising results, scholarships, and the like. Be wary of anyone who tells you that their child needs to quit their team in favor of some private coach or special organization. There's a whole cottage industry of youth gurus promising performance, scholarships, and more. Don't be the parent who thinks the coaching guru or a recruiting service is the difference-maker. It isn't. If your kid is good enough and motivated, they'll figure it out.

6. Your support should be unconditional; it should not be dependent on the results of the game (or if they even play a game to begin with). This is a simple, but worthwhile reminder. Win or lose, be there. That's it. It's not complicated. In [Win the Inside Game](#), I outline research on high school, college, and even professional sports teams that shows **creating an environment where athletes feel supported and cared about leads to more motivated, happy, and even better-performing athletes.**

7. Resist the urge to always step in. Let your kid figure things out. Support them. But let them figure out how to navigate some of the challenges that come with sport. Look for your spots to step in when needed. But don't be the overbearing parent who goes to the coach or teacher every time your child underperforms. Let them navigate it. Sport and the classroom are great and safe containers for the real world.

8. Hold yourself back from going all-in. A few times a month I get a message from a worried parent that their kid isn't measuring up or progressing as fast their peers. They obviously care, but they suggest drastic interventions as the solution. So I'm going to say this: *Don't move across the state or country chasing athletics.*

Your kid isn't that good. And if he or she is, they'll make it regardless of where they are at. **You may think going all-in to help your child is a good thing. The more invested you are, the more pressure and expectations fall on that child's lap.** You want to support, not obsess. If you obsess, I promise it will end up backfiring. If the child chooses to be a

bit obsessive about their sport, it should be entirely their decision. Your job as a parent then transitions to providing perspective, to help ensure that his or her passion is the harmonious variety and not the obsessive.

9. Chill out and step back. Every coach has a story of a parent who by all accounts was loving, yet their simply showing up to a game or meet would cause their child to underperform. It wasn't anything they said at the competition. It was just that their parent was in the stands.

In fact, research shows that choking in sport is partially because we perform in front of an audience and feel judged. In an article entitled [The Many Threats of Self-Consciousness](#), Massimiliano Cappuccio and colleagues concluded that "concerns about self-presentation may be the origin of the increased state anxiety for choking-susceptible athletes." It's not that audiences are a requirement for choking. It's that they encourage and activate threat mode, when our sense of self is in danger in something that we care about. Choking isn't succumbing to the pressure; it is a self-protective strategy gone wrong. And one of the items that activates this is when we are performing in front of people we care about, people whose opinions we value.

It's why when [researchers](#) studied a variety of ways to increase anxiety and the impact each had on performance, it wasn't punishment or playing for money that causes anxiety increase and performance to decline. It was performing in front of teammates or coaches. The same holds for parents. People want to perform well in front of those that matter. They feel like they let you down if they don't. This occurs even if you are the kindest, most loving person in the world. It's human nature. You can think of all the above principles as ways not to exacerbate it.

After spending a decade handing out athletic scholarships before stepping away from collegiate coaching, the best advice I can give is to not play the "pursuit of the scholarship" game. If the child is good enough and wants it, they'll figure it out. If it's coming from mom or dad, the coach will see that.

My first year in college coaching a parent and kid walked into my office. The parent spent 30 minutes going on and on about their child, the talent they had, and how they had so much more potential than the results they'd shown so far. The kid barely talked. The tennis coach who had an office next to mine came in after the parent had left. He said, "Just a word of advice, you don't want that athlete. It won't turn out well for the kid. And the parent will be a headache."

And more often than not, in similar situations, that tennis coach was correct. **Let your kids be kids. Support them.** But don't get in their way. They've already got enough expectations and pressure from living in a world where they are constantly judged on social media, where they have to measure up against the world instead of just their local school. **Give them space explore and basic support, and then get out of their way.**

The odds are your child isn't going to be a champion. It's just how odds work. So **do you want to leave them with a positive experience, with life lessons on learning how to fail, compete, be a great teammate, and so on? Or do you want to wring every bit of joy out of the process, in the minuscule chance it helps them make it to the top, when the reality is your pushing probably actually hurts over the long haul.**

Take a lesson from those who've made it, like Lindsay Gallo. It is okay to be laid back about your kid's future athletic success. In fact, it probably helps.

[-Steve](#)