

THE
S P O R T S
P A R E N T
S O L U T I O N

PROVEN STRATEGIES FOR
TRANSFORMING PARENTS FROM
OBSTACLES TO ALLIES

J.P. NERBUN

FOREWORD BY
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*To my children Alena, Kieran, and Conall, who accompanied me during
countless early mornings as I wrote this book.*

*It is my hope that sports will forever enrich and
strengthen the bond between us.*

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FOREWORD

At the end of another long day of teaching, my principal walked unexpectedly into my classroom to escort me to the superintendent's office.

I had just finished my first season as a high school basketball coach, and unbeknownst to me, I was being ushered into a meeting with the administration to discuss a litany of parent complaints that arose during the season.

The superintendent had done his homework. He talked with every parent who demanded to be heard. We finished that year 1–18, yet somehow I survived. The pressure campaign continued over the years, including letters to the administration, phone calls lobbying individual school board members, and parents cornering the superintendent at the local gas station. Fortunately, the administration had my back. I would not always be so lucky.

I rarely knew who was saying what, but the lesson was clear . . .

Parents cannot be trusted.

My approach to parents was like that of a defense attorney. I carefully laid out our expectations in a manual that, in some years, approached 40 pages. I wanted policies to be clear to cover my back, but most of all, I wanted parents to stay as far away from the team as possible.

Sound familiar?

Coaching has become more complicated than ever due to the involvement of parents in sports. They demand a seat at the table, often acting as agents, coaches, trainers, and psychologists for their children. They are more financially invested than ever before in their child's development, and often have their own identity wrapped up in the athlete's performance. Coaches from youth leagues to the NBA are wrestling with how to handle their escalating influence.

While many have written about the countless examples of abhorrent parent behavior in the news today, no one has taken the time to examine a way forward that equips coaches to do the unthinkable—to build positive relationships with the sports parent by inviting them into the team experience.

That is, until now.

For most of my career, I would have described the perfect sports parent as one who followed the advice of Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson:

“Know your role and shut your mouth.”

But as I worked to become a more transformational coach, I began to feel a hint of hypocrisy. On the one hand, we told parents our program would be built on love. On the other hand, it was quite clear that it only applied to the coaches and players. We wanted parents to recognize the dynamic culture we were building within the team, yet we did everything possible to keep them from experiencing it for themselves.

Even as my heart toward parents began to change, there was still one major obstacle that took years of trial and error to figure out.

I simply didn't know *what* to do. I didn't know where to turn for advice, examples, or encouragement.

In short, I didn't have access to this book.

What you will find in these pages is a message of hope. It is possible to engage with parents in a positive way that broadens your influence, facilitates better communication, and creates a more meaningful experience for everyone.

However, J.P. doesn't just make a compelling argument for a different approach. He also shows us the way. Each chapter is rich with examples of strategies that have proven effective in the real world. Drawing from experienced coaches at every level, J.P. provides the roadmap I wish I'd had when I started coaching 20 years ago.

Gandhi famously said we must be the change we want to see in the world. The more we invest in building partnerships with parents, the more supportive they will become, and the greater transformation we will be able to bring into this world.

Like it or not, the change starts with us.

Let this book show you the way.

With gratitude,

Nate Sanderson

Co-host of *Coaching Culture Podcast*

Two-time Iowa high school basketball state champions

Head girls basketball coach at Mount Vernon High School

INTRODUCTION

UNLOCKING THE POWER OF PARENTS IN SPORTS

A few days after Christmas in 2016, I hit a new low in my challenges with sports parents. Following a typical morning weekend practice, I was leaving the school parking lot when a parent abruptly sped toward me, swerved in front of my car, and blocked my exit. I felt like I was in a movie scene where the bad guys show up and throw a guy into the back of their van. As I stepped out of my car to confront the father of a player I had been coaching for the past five years, he charged toward me with clenched fists and a face flushed with anger, giving the impression that he was on the verge of throwing a punch. Not sure what was going on, I stood frozen in confusion and fear.

Although the altercation never became physical, in some ways I wish it had so people could have seen the damage it left. The verbal assault was unlike any I had experienced before. He had been triggered because I held his son out of practice that morning for showing up late, a team policy that had been enforced throughout the season. Yet, over the next five minutes, this parent went beyond criticizing my coaching. His comments became deeply personal as he challenged my integrity and sanity.

“I am done with you and your crazy philosophies,” he said. “The boys would be better off without you.”

The criticism, rage, and anger were scary and deeply hurtful. This wasn’t just any parent—it was a father whom I had come to know, like, and respect over the last five years. And now, as my team was in the worst losing stretch I had ever experienced in 30 seasons of coaching, this parent’s faith in me had evaporated, even though over the years (and this year in particular) I demonstrated a deep level of care for his son. I was left speechless. What can you say in such a moment?

After he got into his car and drove away in a fury, I didn’t drive more than 50 meters before I had my very first panic attack. In recent years, the weight of coaching had started to take its toll, and at this moment it had finally caught up with me. On the *Coaching Culture* podcast, my friend Cody Royle, author of *The Tough Stuff*, aptly describes the weight coaches carry as “the accumulation of stress and anxiety resulting from a deep care for individuals and the profound impact and influence one’s role holds over them.”¹ The sleepless nights, long hours, and time away from my family started to feel like it wasn’t worth it when I had to deal with what felt like a lot of parental bullshit.

I don't give up in life, but that day brought me as close to giving up as ever. I nearly listened to the words of that father and quit mid-season. But I didn't. I persisted. And then six years later, one month after publishing my second book, *The Culture System*,² where I recounted the story of that panic attack, I received a random text from that father who still had never apologized for that day. He wrote:

“Hello coach! How's it going? Hopefully all is well. This is Danny's dad. All is well on this end. Danny is doing well. I was having a conversation with friends the other day, a conversation that comes up every so often discussing some of the best coaches that I came across during my son's time being involved in sports. My answer is Coach Nerbun. I often told Danny that with each coach we encounter, at the end of the season, there should be at least one thing we learned and can take with us. Although we learned a lot concerning the game of basketball from you, here is why you are my favorite coach. You were straightforward, fair, firm, and honest with Danny. Hell, you were the same with me. Some of the conversations, whether pleasant or not, made big impacts on how I looked at my approach to raising Danny, which was definitely needed as he came into his later teen and young adult years. So thank you for being Coach Nerbun.”

When I got this message I was overcome with emotion. My wife too was moved to tears upon reading it. For coaches, criticism from parents can be deeply hurtful and can impact not only them, but their loved ones as well. The highs and lows of the coaching experience are felt by the family as they are the ones often dealing with the wreckage. In many ways, the father's message helped to not only validate my work in sports over the last five years but heal the wounds inflicted by many parents.

The message taught me a valuable lesson. As coaches we not only have the power to influence the athletes we coach, but also the parents of those athletes. This father credited me with making a big impact on how he raised his son during a critical period in his development. As someone who still remembers being accosted in a school parking lot and told that my coaching philosophies were crazy, this realization was truly mind-blowing.

The message made me wonder how much more of a positive influence I could have had on athletes if I had intentionally leveraged this potential to influence parents. How much more buy-in could I have gotten for the culture I was working to create?

Despite the team's successful turnaround that season and the affirmation I received six years later, I realized that my approach to parents was flawed. Rather than viewing parents as potential partners and allies, I had seen them as a problem to avoid or even remove from the equation. My approach prevented me from fully leveraging the potential influence and impact I could have had on both the athletes and their families. It hindered my effectiveness as a coach, leader, and someone who desired to positively influence the lives of athletes.

Why I Wrote This Book

Every coach experiences challenging moments with parents, whether it's dealing with difficult individuals or even well-intentioned parents who have lost perspective. With over 15 years of coaching, I've quite the collection of moments—from parents coming into the locker room crying after a game about their son's playing time to a parent leaving me a dozen drunk voicemails with incoherent advice. Unlike

some coaches I know, I was lucky not to have been physically attacked, had my tires slashed, or endured a parent campaign to get me fired.

A quick search for “sports parents” on Google reveals that I’m not alone in my experiences, with the majority of articles casting them in a negative light. You’ll encounter articles like “World Cup scam highlights a big problem: The nightmare sports parent” from the *Washington Post* and “Sports Parents, We Have a Problem” from *Psychology Today*, coupled with advice articles like “Getting Bad Sports Parents to Behave Better.”

Difficult sports parents are not confined to particular sports or regions of the country. They are not even confined to parents per se. “Parents” is just the shorthand I’ll use when talking about any family member or guardian—grandparent, aunt, or longtime family friend—who is invested in the well-being of an athlete. In fact, coaches at all levels consistently identify parents as the primary issue in today’s coaching environment. And while there have always been difficult parents, those of “Generation Z” (born between 1997 and 2012) have earned a reputation for coddling their children and working hard to protect them from any pain or disappointment. As a result, an athlete’s lack of toughness, poor attitude, or sense of entitlement can often be directly attributed to their parents. In many cases, parents actively work against the team culture that coaches are trying to build, discrediting their messages and lessons.

Some parents initially appear supportive of coaching goals and standards, only to reveal their true colors when their child fails to receive the playing time they feel entitled to. It’s disheartening to witness how quickly they shift their attitude from cooperation to entitlement. Their support appears to be solely contingent on their child’s success and their own personal satisfaction. This is a common

experience for coaches, and it can be incredibly difficult to navigate. Experiences like these leave coaches distrustful of every parent—even the sane and well-intentioned ones.

It comes as no surprise then that the number one reason why coaches are leaving the profession in droves is due to parents. In a survey from 2017, 82 percent of coaches reported that dealing with parents has gotten worse throughout their coaching careers.³ This is not just the crazy sports parent captured on camera getting into a fight with the coach, referee, or another parent. Every team has a parent or small group of parents who absorb coaches' energy, keep them up at night, and have some coaches living in fear of losing their jobs. No coach should endure a life filled with fear, abuse, or incessant criticism, particularly considering that more than two-thirds of coaches receive no compensation and engage in coaching primarily to make a positive impact.

Since 2017, I've been writing and podcasting about leadership and culture in sports, and I've received thousands of messages from coaches seeking help with team issues. Without a doubt, even at the collegiate level, parents are the number one most common issue. Throughout my consulting and coaching career, I have witnessed the challenging situations that coaches face, including false accusations, lawsuits, parent uprisings, and even bullying. The pain from these experiences can be traumatic for coaches and their families, creating even more barriers in our already complicated relationships with parents.

I've written this book for the coach who has experienced resistance and criticism from parents but remains committed to coaching and making a positive impact in their athletes' lives. This book is for the coach who wants to cultivate positive and life-changing relationships with their athletes, challenge them, and help them grow. It's for

the coach who seeks to create a team culture where players and parents alike are dedicated to the team's success and willing to make personal sacrifices for the greater good. Above all, this book is for coaches who are open to trying a radically new approach and willing to challenge their own thinking, recognizing that there may be better ways to achieve their goals.

I want to be clear: this book is not for coaches who cling to outdated coaching methods and a top-down, authoritarian leadership style. It's not for coaches who blame others for their team's struggles and are unwilling or unaware of the need to make changes in themselves and their approach. This book is for the coaches who are willing to evolve and grow, recognizing that positive change starts with self-reflection and a willingness to try new things.

How This Book Will Help You

In the early stages of his career, Steven Spielberg faced a daunting challenge that could have spelled disaster for the budding filmmaker. While filming the movie *Jaws*, the crew was confronted with a major setback. The mechanical shark, which had consumed a significant portion of their budget, repeatedly malfunctioned, causing extensive delays and rendering entire days of filming useless. The malfunctioning shark not only caused the film to go over budget, but also put it behind schedule.

Spielberg's turning point came when he realized that the defective shark was not the main obstacle. Instead, he recognized that his approach to the problem needed to change, leading him to pivot his thinking and make significant script revisions. This ultimately resulted in a shark movie without an actual shark. This revolutionary approach

proved to be a stroke of genius, as *Jaws* went on to shatter box office records, becoming an all-time classic. The film's triumph lay in the power of suggestion, with the absence of the shark creating a profound impact on the audience.

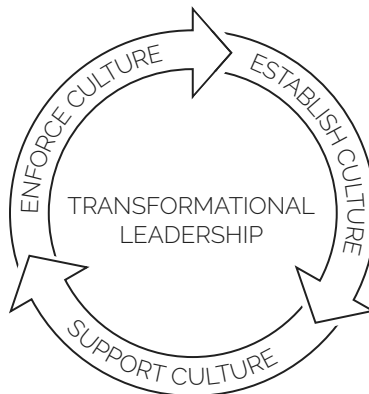
Like Spielberg's faulty mechanical shark, parents are not actually your problem. More likely, the problem is *your approach* to the parents in your program. Rather than providing a solution to your "shark problem," this book provides a new perspective on the challenges of sports parents, suggesting that parents can be valuable partners in your athletes' development and therefore part of the solution. By reshaping your relationship with parents and how you engage with them, you can change the story of your athletes and teams, resulting in more positive and beneficial outcomes.

In most circumstances—despite what we might like to believe—coaches are not the primary influencers in the lives of young athletes. Parents are. Engaging with them in the right way can lead to productive relationships that positively impact the lives of athletes. And that impact isn't limited to the playing field. Richard Weissbourd, professor of moral development at Harvard University and author of *The Parents We Mean to Be*, offers this insight into the outcomes of effective coaching: "Coaches should recognize, too, that while there are advantages to creating a temporary space where children are insulated from family pressures, ultimately their job is not to rescue children from their families but to strengthen the tie between parent and child that is at the backbone of children's healthy development."⁴ Good coaching can strengthen families.

In the upcoming pages, you'll discover stories of other leaders and organizations who have successfully engaged parents, including 22-time national championship soccer coach Anson Dorrance, Navy

ship captain Mike Abrashoff, and an elementary school in one of the most underserved districts in America. These stories are not just inspiring, but provide practical insights on how to create positive change within the parent culture of your team.

The book's framework follows the one outlined in my previous book, *The Culture System*. Part One starts with our leadership principles and mindset, which are at the core of the system. There I propose a transformational paradigm for coaches to think about the sports parent relationship that not only underpins effective coaching and a positive team culture but creates stronger bonds with parents. Parts Two through Four detail strategies and methods for *establishing*, *supporting*, and *enforcing* the culture you aim to create. Part Two focuses on building a partnership in the early connection points in the recruiting process, traditional parent meetings, and in those initial conversations with parents. Part Three offers some ideas on how to strengthen the partnership and minimize issues through improved communication practices with parents and strengthening their connection to the team by creating powerful moments. Last, in Part Four we unpack ways to work with your administration to create some boundaries with parents and embrace and grow through conflicts that might occur.



While the framework roughly follows the timeline of the season, the most important aspect is actively embodying this approach toward parents (rather than merely following a set of steps). You will learn a lot of new tools and strategies: take what resonates with you and leave what doesn't. Effective application of this book will come down to finding what works in your context and implementing it in a way that is authentic to you. Doing so systematically helps you to be consistent and will make it seem effortless over time.

No matter what your current relationship with parents may be, implementing a system for working with them can significantly elevate your team's culture. Leveraging the influence of parents not only reduces tangential issues that consume your time and energy, but fosters stronger relationships, creates positive experiences, and profoundly impacts your athletes' lives. By mitigating the interference that parents can create, you strengthen your team's sense of purpose and improve their performance.