

# *Parenting the Elite Athlete*

*by Hubert E Armstrong, Jr., Ph.D.*

*On February 13, 1984, Seattle's Debbie Armstrong slashed down the icy slope of Mount Jaharina in Sarajevo. With a joyful whoop and an exuberant grin, she claimed the women's giant slalom gold medal for the United States. Here Debbie's psychologist father suggests how other parents can foster similar excellence in their children.*

What role should parents play in the career of a young person who happens to be an elite athlete? What can, or should, parents do to foster excellence in sport, or any other field? Once achieved, does elite athletic status cause special problems for young people? And if so, how can parents help?

As parents of two children, each of whom has reached a high level of achievement in sport, my wife, Dollie, and I have given these questions a lot of thought. Debbie's gold medal performance in Sarajevo has prompted many parents to ask us, "How did it happen?" "What did you do?" Questions like these can't be answered adequately, of course, but perhaps examining them can help others come to some conclusions of their own.

Many parents have been influenced by a current trend to deemphasize competition in sports, fearing that competition places excessive pressure on young people. Our view has always been quite different. We value athletic participation and competition for ourselves and have always viewed it as an important training ground for our children. Of course, nothing of value is without risks, but good supervision and guidance by parents can minimize these risks, and the rewards of competitive sport for children can be enormous.

The classic view of sport is that it prepares one for life, that it presents the essential dilemmas and challenges of the real world without the potentially devastating implications. From the psychological point of view, I believe this is true. I think of competitive sport as a laboratory course in the psychology of adjustment. If the laboratory is handled well, and the child has proper guidance and support, important skills of personal management can be learned: organization, self-control, interpersonal relations, stress management, and self-confidence. Perhaps most important is the opportunity to learn that as fun and important as winning can be, it has no bearing on one's value as a person.

## **What makes an elite athlete and how can parents help?**

A heavy dose of happenstance contributes to the making of an elite athlete just as it contributes to excellence of any kind. Debbie recently reminded me that I once told her and her brother Olin that everyone can be the best in the world at something. This may be true! And it is a parent's responsibility to identify and reinforce a child's interests and talents whether they be in math, music, sports, or the less tangible areas of

performance such as interpersonal relations or the appreciation of beauty. It is a happy accident when a child's God-given talents coincide with his or her parents' values and the community's capacity to provide opportunities. All too often parents "know" what they want their child to excel in and are insensitive to the child's interests or talents that may lie in another field. Fostering an elite performer's ability, whether it be in ski racing, academics, or social consciousness, is like creating a work of art. You must go with the material. Successful parents value their child's interests, talents, and tastes and encourage their child to pursue them.

But will a child become a world class chess player without exposure to chess? Of course not. Therefore, the parents who value sports and competition and want to expose their child to those experiences should do so. The key is in the parents' recognition that only opportunity can be provided. A parent cannot make a star; the exposure may not take. The ugliest version of the "Little League parent" is the one whose child is trying, and perhaps could enjoy the experience, except for the parent who can accept nothing less than perfection and communicates disappointment and disapproval to the child. As parents we can't make things happen. The best we can do is provide opportunities and guidance, then step aside and let things happen. .

### **Set Goals**

Sport psychologists stress the importance of goal setting. Good goal setting minimizes the sense of failure and enhances the possibility of success, but it can be risky. Unreachable goals are not goals at all, but prescriptions for failure. Meaningful goals are reachable in a reasonable timeframe that a child can grasp: a few days, a week, or a month. Often children will state goals like "going to the Olympics" or "being the best." These are dreams, not goals. Dreams are important and should be encouraged, but they do not provide the function of goals and should not be confused with them.

Debbie's and Olin's goals were always to lower their points (a scoring system in ski racing indicative of a racer's standing relative to the competition) or to improve at some technical skill. Debbie once commented that she had never set a goal she didn't reach. She wasn't saying that she had reached high goals only that her goals were always within reach. A friend of mine once asked Olin what he hoped to achieve in ski racing. He replied simply, "To get better." Maintain a positive outlook.

*The* most effective coaches stress the fundamentals; the most effective parents do the same. Nothing is more fundamental than a positive outlook. This included an emphasis on what is good about the child, not his or her weak points; what the child has done well, not his or her bad behavior; and what good will come from an experience, not what disasters may occur. A parent's positive focus arms that child for success in life, as well as in sport.

Perhaps the most critical aspect of a positive outlook is an emphasis on fun. If you are doing something because it is fun, how can you fail? Conversely, if you are engaging in sport for any other reason - to make a living, to beat the opposition, to prove your worth, or just to win - how can it be fun or satisfying unless or until you win? Sport can be fun and so can life; both are more fruitful the more fun they are. So where do discipline and hard work fit in? They come easily when you are doing what you love.

Another aspect of a positive outlook is praise. Coaches, teachers, and parents sometimes make the mistake of assuming that the talented child doesn't need it. Common sense suggests that excessive positive attention leads to an inflated ego. In fact, an inflated ego doesn't come from too much of anything, but from too little of many things: self-confidence, recognition - there are a host of possibilities, but too much praise is unlikely to be one of them. Like everyone, elite athletes need to hear that others, especially their parents, value their performance. Not their winning, their performance. Debbie once told me, "You can be great, but you have to hear it. Straight A's don't count if everyone acts like they expect it."

### **Value the child, not his or her accomplishments**

A talented child in any field is at risk! Everyone is enthusiastic about his or her skills and accomplishments, but the child can develop the impression that "they don't care about me." A parent's love and support should

be unconditional and not a reward for the child's performance. Unfortunately the elite athlete or other talented child doesn't always know this. It is easy for a parent who truly values the child apart from the performance to somehow overlook the need to communicate this love and support.

Elite performers are not special people, just people with special skills. They have the same needs as others for unconditional affection and respect. Often parents, overly impressed or even intimidated by the child's skills, deprive the child of the fundamental nurturing and attention they would provide a less capable child. Some parents impose more discipline and structure on the gifted performer than is justified or needed. Their desire not to "waste his talents" they don't allow pursuits they would accept in another child.

### **Teach independence**

Referring to Sarajevo, Debbie once observed, "I was in the starting gate by myself." She elaborated, "I don't know a world class athlete who doesn't have a mind of her own." Where does this come from? Can a child suddenly become independent and self-reliant in a competitive situation at a high level? Of course not; it begins early. Children need opportunities for independent decision-making, backed by parental support when the decision proves wrong.

### **The most important lesson in sport**

Your value as a person is not determined by how much you win. Sport's greatest lesson is how to accept loss - not failure, but loss. Losing in sport is never failure. Too many parents equate losing with failure and, since failure is unacceptable, teach their children to place the responsibility for it on others: poor coaching, unfair officiating, and weak teammates. Winning is too important to these parents. Winning is fun, but it is a by-product of all that is important in sport for young people.

Debbie was never a frequent winner. As she pointed out in interviews after winning the gold medal in Sarajevo, "(When I was young) I was the one who came in third when the one who was supposed to come in third fell." About the time she started winning at the local or the regional level she would move to the national or international level where she would meet ski racers more experienced and talented than she. They were the winners. But was she the loser? Of course not!

Debbie entered the Winter Olympic Games in Sarajevo never having won an international ski race nor a national championship. Up to that time, the Junior Nationals in 1981 had been her biggest win. But she was an experienced and competent ski racer who, in my opinion, had learned something more important than how to win: she had learned how to lose. She entered the starting gate unconcerned about losing, consumed only by her enthusiasm for what she was doing and determined to "experience this Olympics experience." She did, and a gold medal was the by-product.

My advice to parents who want to foster and support excellence in sport, or any field, is this. Don't fear the risks of competition; just be there to support your child when he or she doesn't win. Think of competitive sport as a laboratory for personal growth where important lessons of self-management can be learned. Don't demand excellence in a given field. Remember, your child is excellent; just look for the ways in which that excellence displays itself.

Provide experiences, but avoid disapproval if those opportunities aren't capitalized on to the degree you had hoped. Help your child set reachable goals and distinguish them from dreams. Be positive. Reinforce your child's efforts, whatever his or her level. Always stress the importance and legitimacy of having fun. Communicate that your love is unconditional, not a reward for accomplishment. Allow your child to learn independence early. And finally, help your child to learn the most important lesson in sport: how to lose without feeling like a failure.

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