



5 IMPORTANT
MENTAL LESSONS
FOR
YOUTH ATHLETES
WHO DREAM OF
PLAYING COLLEGE
SPORTS

February 2, 2015 by Ed McLaughlin

Over my 20 years in college athletics and the last nine as a Div. I athletic director, I have enjoyed working directly with several high-level men's and women's soccer programs. I have the fortune of learning the game from coaches with whom I worked and understanding the game from watching my children play it.

College soccer coaches that I know across Division I talk about recruiting and developing talent as two most important aspects of the job.

College coaches must recruit student-athletes who have the physical and mental tools to succeed at the Division I level because all the talent on earth will not reach its potential unless the mentality exists to achieve.

In my time as a Division I athletic director, I have seen talented student-athletes come into college and excel way beyond their wildest dreams. Those student-athletes reach their dreams because of their mentality and willingness to grow. I have also seen talented young men and women who were elite players but could not excel as student-athletes at the Div. I level because of their mentality.

Youth soccer parents that I have encountered in different places talk about being recruited to play in college as one of the most important reasons as to why their children play travel or elite level soccer. Whether these parents tell me that reason because I work in college athletics or cite those reasons because they believe it, I have no idea.

As a parent now of elite-level youth soccer players, I have learned a new perspective of why elite-level youth players succeed or fail. I can't give them tactical advice – the kids have excellent coaches for that. I can't give them the gift of athleticism – the kids get that from their mother. I have learned that the greatest gift that I can give my children in sports is the gift of mentality.

I can give them an awareness of the fact that the margin between the talented elite player and the talented college soccer student-athlete is thin and MENTALITY IS THE DIFFERENCE.

Coincidentally, those lessons translate to success in life as well.

If your elite soccer player has a dream of playing in college, you can help the most by fostering these mental qualities in your children and reinforcing them every day. Morgan Wootten, the legendary high school basketball coach at DeMatha High School, is famous for saying "It's not what you teach; it's what you emphasize."

Lesson #1: Be Coachable

First and foremost, teach your child to be coachable.

Being coachable means that your child has respect for his or her coach and listens to what is being taught. Being coachable means that your child trusts the process, listens to what he or she is told and executes it without complaint. Your child may not master the skill but he or she has mastered the work ethic necessary to master that skill.

As parents, we struggle to trust the process as much as our children struggle to trust it. But trust in the process is most important when your faith in the process is most difficult.

Lesson #2: Be comfortable with being uncomfortable

Second, teach your child to reach out of his or her comfort zone by having difficult conversations with the coach.

By the age of U11, my children had to be the ones to have conversations with their coaches about playing time or skill progression. I am happy to attend any meeting so I can reinforce the message to the kids, but my children need to learn how to talk with the adult in a respectful way yet advocate for themselves.

When your elite soccer player children reach college, coaches will not (not should they) have a conversation with parents about playing time.

Your children need preparation and practice in how to talk to their college coaches. Elite soccer provides you the opportunity as a parent to teach your child a life lesson on communicating with authority and advocacy.

Lesson #3: Be an excellent teammate and leader

Third, teach your child the characteristics of how to be an excellent teammate and leader. These go hand in hand.

What we find at the Div. I level is that the best leaders are the best teammates because they have learned the attributes of leadership from playing on teams.

Teach your child SELFLESSNESS by emphasizing good body language if a teammate makes a mistake. Teach your child ACCOUNTABILITY by not accepting blame toward others. Teach your child a STRONG WILL and stronger COMMUNICATION SKILLS by not avoiding difficult conversations.

Every successful team captain in Div. I college soccer I have known throughout my career have these qualities and many more.

Lesson #4: Be positive

Fourth, teach your child positivity.

This lesson seems easy, right? Positivity doesn't equate to being laid back nor does it mean unrealistic. **Positivity means having confidence enough to self evaluate and find a way to reach goals.** If your kids believe they can reach a goal, they are correct.

Lesson #5: Be mentally tough

Last – but most importantly – teach your children **mental toughness** and **resilience**.

College may be the first time in their lives that they don't start, or that they don't even play at all. College soccer players survive the disappointments of freshman year because they are mentally prepared for whatever happens to them. They have dealt with adversity, disappointment and failure and learned how to grow from those experiences.

Teaching mental toughness starts now.

Today.

When my daughter, a goalkeeper, was benched from a tournament last year in favor of a guest player, she attended the tournament, sat on the bench, cheered for her team, participated in warm-ups and did whatever she could to help the team.

She didn't complain. She didn't feel sorry for herself. She remained positive about her team. She showed her teammates that she was invested in her team. And, most importantly, it fueled her to work harder. She never blamed anyone nor did she allow it to destroy her confidence. (*Read more about this experience in A Master Lesson in Being A Teammate*)

I could have kept her home from the tournament, saving her from some mythical embarrassment. What would staying home have taught her? Remember that lesson about trusting the process and let your child grow from adversity rather than fear it.

If you start to think that all five of these lessons depend upon each other, you are correct

“Mentality defines success”

