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'Parental poison' pervades American sports landscape

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Sarah Palin may have made hockey moms famous, but if you've covered, coached, or have had anything to do with high school sports in recent years you also know about "basketball dads," "gridiron grandmas," "swimming uncles" and every other combination of sport and family member.

Families, especially moms and dads, are more involved with their young athletes than ever before and many are simply too involved.

They coach their kids at the youth level, follow them every step along the way and then only reluctantly turn them over to high school coaches and still try to assert their influence.

One coach summed it up to me this way: "Show me a coach who doesn't have a problem with at least one parent and I'll show you a team of orphans."

Disgruntled parents are often at the root of ousted coaches, transfers that create tensions among schools and leagues, and underperforming teams that never reach their potential.

Coaches aren't perfect, of course, but most of them try to be objective and do what's best for the program. After all, what good does it do them not to play the best players?

Many parents, however, are only interested in their kid and care much more about the quest for scholarship dollars rather than wins and championships.

I thought this was basically a youth and high school problem, but I learned on Saturday that this "parental poison" has spread to the collegiate level, even Division I.

Mike Deane may not be a household name, but the Wagner men's basketball coach has won more than 400 games over 23 seasons at the Division I level and taken three teams (Siena, Marquette and Lamar) to the NCAA Tournament.

I met him at a coaches clinic run by the Lehigh Valley Basketball School and was surprised to hear his comments about parents and their negative impact on kids. He has seen a lot of changes, and most are not for the better.

"Coaches are faced with a lot of these parents who think their son is worthy of a scholarship and think they should just shoot more," Deane said. "No, kids need to play the whole game."

He says there's an expanding generation of kids who are pampered and feel a sense of entitlement rather than "working for it."

Deane said flat-out: "It hurts our country. And the biggest problem is not the kids, it's the parents.

"The parents have ruined things. They have lost perspective. They have blinders on. They look it as though 70 are in a marching band and 69 are out of step, but not my Johnny.

"The kids hear parents say 'Coach so and so is a dumb [bleep] because he won't play you enough or get you enough shots.' How is the kid supposed to feel about his coach?"

Deane even admitted that he has tried to recruit kids "from farther away, so the parents aren't around as much and when they come it's more or less a treat for them to see their kid play."

Unfortunately, he said, "some parents make every game and they get vocal in the crowd and it's a not a good thing. That has gotten a lot worse than it used to be, and I know it's really bad at the high school level. A lot of high school coaches get out of the business because they learn fast that the parents are a pain in the butt and they're not making a lot of money anyway."

This is nothing new, nothing that hasn't been said before. And, it's certainly not something I haven't written about before.

But when you hear a Division I men's basketball coach say it's a problem, then you realize that this isn't a Lehigh Valley issue, it's a national epidemic.
