

***This is Part One of a four-part series of postings for parents.  
Please talk with your child's coach about any or all of the following . . .***

*BSF coaches realize that being the parent of a nordic skier can be challenging, and at times very confusing. It is our hope that posting excerpts from Richard Taylor's book, No Pain, No Gain? will provide insight and provoke thoughtful discussion among parents, athletes and coaches (Taylor's "forum of informing discussion").*

*Richard Taylor was captain of the US Olympic Cross-Country Ski Team at the 1964 Olympics. He was an Assistant Coach at the 1980 Olympics in Lake Placid, NY. He was Head Coach for the US team to the World Junior Championships in 1984. Taylor has written articles widely on cross-country skiing in journals and magazines, and published No Pain, No Gain? in 2002 (Mechanic Street Press). Since 1987 Taylor has been Director of Nordic Skiing at Gould Academy in Bethel, Maine where he also teaches English, German and Latin.*

### **"A Letter to Parents," by Richard Taylor**

Parents are the closest to their kids and closest to many of the sports their kids choose. Yet as their kids develop from youngsters to teens to college athletes and beyond, parents often feel on the defensive. Their kids soon seek information and affirmation elsewhere. The kids themselves become more differentiated and complex. Emotional and social issues overlay physical development, and coaches' personalities enter powerfully into the child's most dynamic years of growth. Parents may feel more and more separated from this relationship which they have cherished with both child and sport.

In the first instance this challenging relationship is a result of the child's development itself. Whereas younger children (8 and 9) prefer adult feedback, by 10 to 14 already that preference declines in favor of peer comparison and the direction of the coach. The later adolescent years tend to individualize further, even with strong reliance on a coach. Multiple sources of competence evaluation are used, particularly internal criteria such as goal achievement, skill-improvement, ease in learning new skills, and enjoyment of the activity. Thus, as the child develops, the parents' role shifts from clear and simple major influence to something more complex, more collaborative, and much more subtle.

That may not always seem just to parents. After all, "it's my kid!" Still, we need to remember that the kid does develop as an adolescent by progressively separating from parents. As both parent and coach I remind myself, again and again, of the adage: each of us belongs to himself first. That holds for kids as well.

Parents themselves continue to develop in the midst of their child's growth, of course, so confusion and uncertainty remain familiar fare. One result is that they

may tend to lose trust in their educated convictions and deeper intuitions about their kids. Then they may simply fret or attempt to re-assert their control as parents.

What is most welcome then is a forum of informing discussion which includes us all together. Then parents would indeed re-affirm what their inklings as former athletes and astute adults tell them: much is awry with our children's experiences in sport. . . . [H]arder-is-better type training produces only mediocre results. My guess is that many other parents and coaches are also motivated in no small part by a desire similar to my own: to provide young athletes with wiser training than we received, and that being more intelligent and asking persistent questions is the best way to do that. We start by simply saying what we have seen.

We have seen much new science following those 1960's, but still few hints of international success. Since then kids have worked hard at home and school and still we share their hopes and pleasures in sport. And we are justified in asking why American educators have not yet effectively responded to the advances of modern physical science and to a number of persistent but misguided notions of physical education.

We have seen, for example, how too frequent and too intense training and competition can be dangerously stressful for early teenagers, and even injurious over many years hence. Many a marvelous young athlete is wasted because of indiscriminate challenges to his or her obvious and fascinating talents. Fired up by the normal desires for recognition and proofs of self-worth, many young men and women, and many coaches, charge into sports with high motivation and competitive spirit but with too little real knowledge of the kinds of preparation required to achieve durable success.

On the other hand, while many obvious talents are used too hard, we see, too late, that others go undiscovered, for they have never received enough time and informed training to let their talents become visible. Aerobic and neuromotor developments require a basic prescription without which it will remain impossible to know what abilities lie within a young athlete. As with musicians, we do not expect ultimate artistry until the time for all intelligent and patient process has been given. Artist, athlete, journeyman and businessman alike have long known this: skill, toughening and refined performance cannot be hurried. Why then is it so hurried and dominated by competition in our schools?

We also live with our children's frantic school year pace. Is that good for them? We sense correctly that precious development time is lost in the fragmentation of three sports seasons every year. Prepped anew for speed and power, by a different coach, to win that season's championship, the young athlete too seldom receives the time needed for the crucial first step in the training preparation curve: basic aerobic endurance. No European or Scandinavian physical culture

program would follow such a calendar, under which a youngster so often sparkles as a junior but then cannot reach higher levels in his years of maturity and greatest potential. To be sure, there is nothing more joyous than the exhilaration of a young winner. But there is also nothing more sad than to find him a frustrated twenty-year-old who, for reasons he cannot grasp, is unable to improve further. His education, his school, his sport have in fact unwittingly double-crossed him, given him pleasure in sport and hope, but not the means to realize its higher levels.

We are wise enough to know, of course, that a relative few rise to top performance. Yet staggering rates of attrition from sports, the distortion of social norms by some of our top athletes and coaches, and the lack of international results justify our misgivings about our sports culture. We have the right and responsibility to ask questions about it. It is, after all, the physical and social context in which our young athletes wish to thrive, and we have much at stake. What follows is an attempt to provide parents with a sound basis for asking those questions.

### **Some Basic Notions About Developing Young Athletes**

Parents and kids belong together. Nothing could be more necessary or logical. Their desires run together, different strands appearing at different times perhaps but braided tightly by physical interdependence and emotional bonds. Parental love is uncompromising in its urge to support a child's success and happiness in sport and it suffers also the anguish of the uncertainties, struggles, hopes, excitements and despairs of learning and developing through which any young athlete must go. . . . The child, after all, gets only one body, and it must be cherished and formed with as much delicacy and precision as possible. Young bodies may seem forgiving, but our observations tell us that the price for casual or partially informed training can be extremely high. And it is the kid who pays it, often life-long.

Parents may in fact even wonder at first if it is even healthy, or wise, for a young athlete to set very high goals and begin to focus and train toward those goals as a teenager. Should summer job time, for example, be sacrificed in part to training needs? Should other sports be low-keyed in order to maintain a year-round training plan? Isn't that approach a little extreme? Is the coach there for my youngster, or is my youngster there for the coach? Isn't this getting a little too serious, too single-minded, maybe even a little compulsive and out of control? Or isn't this too much time spent at play, frivolous young dreaming, wasting time better spent on truly "significant" tasks?

My answer is that any sign of serious inner inspiration to excel is to be welcomed and carefully fostered. (This is quite different from parents pushing their child to excel.) Certainly the young athlete will never know until he or she tries, and the willingness to try is heroic by itself. Each of us belongs to himself first, after all,

and it is the child's right to make the attempt to excel. That will require at least three or four years, even longer, and regardless of the outcome, the life lessons gained in the process will be positive and profound.

I think of performance in sport in the manner of other performing arts. We know how soon a young musician must choose an instrument. We admire the dedication and tenacity of his study and practice, the outright passion of his involvement. We are patient for the years required to achieve mastery. The young athlete is no different, except that the athlete is both instrument and player in one, and there is no more complex, sophisticated, or wonderful instrument. And quite apart from whether or not some ultimate level of mastery is achieved, the process of training towards it will bear deep and durable rewards in self-knowledge and expression, in an articulate sense of both personal humility and power. These rewards make the experience vastly more than mere diversion and games. The effort bespeaks a passion which can mark a person's life culture with a richness and humanity which is fundamental to education or career as well.

Such a commitment to training signifies as well an attraction to a deeper self-awareness; it demonstrates a courageous willingness to measure oneself in public contest. To do so requires both self-possession and maturity, the ability to look life straight in the eye. It hints as a new aspiration toward excellence, a willingness to strive, to fail at times and feel wounded in the process, to heal and try again. The urge, then the passion, for more refined and powerful movement not only brings higher performance; it hints at the core energy of the child's sense of authenticity as an individual, his or her sense of being singularly alive. That passion is a gift not to be set aside, for above all it signals that the child is casting off his need for protection and stepping toward adult freedom. . . .

As the young athlete commits himself to the requirements of an informed training schedule, he moves into a realm of his own, leaving his parents "on the outside," in a state of unease, a sort of elastic tension with their distance from their child.

***Stay tuned for Part Two from Taylor's book:  
"Developmental Aspects of Teenage Sport."***