

Success as a Soccer Parent



A soccer mom's personal growth makes the recreational sport more fun for her and her daughters.

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Just minutes left in the first half and my daughter Stephanie's soccer team was down 1-0. The girls, 11-year-olds like Stephanie, weren't playing well. Their red uniforms seemed to meander all over the field. I stood with parents on the sideline. My hands were clenched. My heart raced. Suddenly a girl named Heather on our team got the ball. She dribbled downfield. The opposing team surrounded her. I saw another girl in red open in front of the goal. *Pass it, Heather*, I thought.

Next thing I knew I was shouting, "Pass it, Heather!" Heather didn't seem to hear. She dribbled nervously. "Pass it, Heather! Pass it!" I hollered again. Why didn't she pass it? "HEATHER, PASS THE BALL!"

The words were hardly out of my mouth when I saw a woman jump up from a lawn chair a few feet away. Heather's mom. She shook her head in disgust. "That's it," she spat. She folded up the chair and stalked off toward the parking lot. A mom sitting between us glanced around. She saw me. A look of resigned recognition passed over her face.

Hey, I thought. *That wasn't fair*. I wasn't one of those awful parents who berated their kids from the sidelines. I didn't yell. Not much, anyway. Okay, I yelled, but not mean things. I was trying to be helpful. The other mom pursed her lips and turned away. I looked from her to Heather's mom, who was nearing her car. I didn't have a problem. Did I?

I certainly didn't when my girls began playing soccer eight years earlier. My husband, Brian, and I signed up Stephanie's older sister, Amy, for a league at the local YMCA in kindergarten. Stephanie followed later in preschool.

Brian had played a little soccer in high school, and I'd been determined to give our daughters the kind of athletic childhood I'd missed. I'd played softball in summer leagues growing up, but back then sports opportunities for girls were pretty limited. I never got to play soccer. And truth be told, I didn't go all out in softball. I admired athletic girls from afar. I wanted to be like them. But I never really worked at it. I didn't want that fate for my girls. I wanted them to be athletes. I remembered the fall day we all gathered for Amy's first orientation. There must have been a hundred kids on the soccer field. The kids were sorted randomly into teams and a local college coach addressed us parents. He talked about the game, about how little kids don't really play so

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much as swarm. “This is a time to encourage your kids,” he said. “Don’t yell at them. Have fun. That’s what we’re here for. Fun.”

Well, obviously, I thought. Who would yell at a six-year-old on a soccer field? I couldn’t imagine getting mad at Amy. Especially not that day we bought her uniform and she put it on and sprinted around the lawn. “Look how fast I run in my cleats!”

At first everything went exactly as the coach said. The kids swarmed hilariously and everyone seemed to spend as much time on the snacks—sliced oranges at halftime, cookies and juice after games, pizza at season’s end—as the soccer. It was fun. Still, I couldn’t help noticing how good Amy was. She kept her head on during games. She followed the ball. She was fast. *She could be a real athlete*, I thought. *I better encourage her.*

I started small. “Great pass, Amy!” “What a goal!” “Way to go!” I did the same for Stephanie. Soon we were a soccer household, our car cluttered with shin guards and checkered balls, always smelling faintly of kid sweat. Posters of soccer star Mia Hamm appeared in Amy’s bedroom. The girls got older and graduated to club ball—more formally organized leagues with out-of-state tournaments and biweekly practices led by paid, experienced coaches. Competition at those club games was fierce. Girls were good. Their coaches—and parents—wanted to win. I wanted to win too. Amy and Stephanie were becoming athletes. *My* athletes. They needed me. I stepped up my encouragement. “Run faster!” I shouted. “Get the ball!” “Stay focused!” The girls pleaded with me to stop.

“It makes us feel like we’re playing bad,” they said. I told them I was only trying to help. But, okay, I heard them. I tried to rein myself in during games. I critiqued their performance on car rides home. Just a few tips to keep in mind next game.

At least I wasn’t like that one mom I saw sometimes. She practically insulted her kids. “You call that playing soccer? Just wait till we get in the car!” The rest of us parents avoided her. Now I watched Heather’s mom get into her car and slam the door. Was she avoiding me too? The half ground to an end. Our girls didn’t score. They trotted to the sideline and huddled around their coach. I glanced around the field. Heather’s mom had finally returned. Only now she was sitting as far away from me as possible. I felt a sliver of doubt. Okay, so maybe I was out of bounds yelling at Heather. That still didn’t mean I had a major problem. Everything I did was for Stephanie and Amy. *I want the best for them, Lord!* I thought. *What’s wrong with that?*

The second half began. Stephanie headed back onto the field. She was sweaty, grass-stained. I admired her strong legs, her purposeful look. She really was turning into the athlete I’d always dreamed of being. I caught myself. What was that? The athlete *I’d* always dreamed of being. The girls ran down the field. They passed Heather’s mom. My eyes lingered there. All at once I knew what I needed to do. I could feel my face turn beet red at the very thought. But if I really did want the best for Stephanie and Amy—if I really was honest with God and myself—I had no choice.

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The walk along the sideline seemed endless. Heather's mom gave me a sidelong glance. I cleared my throat. "Um, I need to apologize," I said. "It's not my place to yell at someone else's child. I shouldn't be yelling at all. I'm sorry. I hope you can forgive me."

Heather's mom stared at the grass. "You're right," she finally said. "It was wrong." That was all. I stood there a while and finally skulked back. Stephanie's team lost, and she and I drove home in silence. That night I sat both of my girls down in the living room. I told them what had happened that day. "I was out of line," I said. "I'm really sorry. I hope you both know just how great I think you are. No matter what happens out on the field."

Amy and Stephanie sighed with relief. "Thanks, Mom," they said, and gave me a big hug. Yes, I still catch myself yelling on occasion...but only positive things now. Amy's still gung ho for soccer. But lately Stephanie has been making noise about devoting herself to orchestra; which would mean that she wouldn't end up being an athlete after all. Who knows, maybe she'll become a musician. Or something I've never even thought of. Now that really would be something to shout to the heavens about.