

## It's about More Than the Trophy

By Katrina Berlin

“How does it feel to be undefeated for five seasons straight?” asked the soft voice on the line. “It feels great!” I lied. I should have told him how I hated the pressure to win, and I hated staring at the bottom of a pool for four hours a day. That’s not the best opening quote to an article, though, so for the time being, it was better to smile and stick with the lie.

At twelve years old, I held fourteen individual pool records and had a wall blanketed with blue ribbons and first-place medals. It wasn’t unusual for parents and opponents to know my exact times or the statistical facts of my history. The soft whispering into ears when I stepped up to swim, the whole time hearing “that’s her!”—I know what small fame is like. I had it for the five years straight when I went undefeated. Being the best, however, was both a blessing and a curse. No one ever wanted to race me, and I almost always had the lane to myself in practice. Swimming is supposed to be a team sport, but I never felt more alone than when I was in the water. High school was even worse when I started 4:30 a.m. swim practices so I could play soccer after school. I could never stay awake in Chemistry, and I hated that chlorine was my unintentional daily perfume. But how were people supposed to understand that I didn’t want to swim anymore? It came so easily to me, and most of my friends were envious of the constant attention I received. It took me awhile to put together what I really wanted to do with my life, and I’m still not done, but one thing I knew was that it didn’t include swimming.

Sunday. That’s the day I told my parents I was tired of swimming back and forth like a damn guppy fish every day. “But you have so much talent! How can you just give it up?” The best answer I could give was that I didn’t love it, and I wasn’t going to waste my life swimming for everyone but me. The question I told them had to be asked was this: Just because a young athlete has talent, are they obligated to pursue that talent even if it means sacrificing happiness, a normal childhood, or even their health? I was already diagnosed with tendonitis in my shoulder and several muscle strains from training when I shouldn’t have. But that’s what highly competitive athletes do: they train when no one else will and they push through the pain of injuries. They also sacrifice a social life, “fun” time, and will most likely be patients so often that there will be a permanent seat in the waiting room with their name on it.

The scary fact is those permanent seats in sports medicine clinics and hospitals aren’t just sitting there, they are multiplying. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that kids ages 5 to 14 had the highest sports-related injury rates (cited in Stenson). The push to be the best—whether from parents, coaches, or peers—has seemed to overcome the original reasons young recreational sports were started. Teamwork, work ethic, and pure enjoyment have taken a backseat to winning. Dr. Henry Goitz, the chief of sports medicine at the Medical College of Ohio in Toledo, makes the point that “Parents—and coaches—who push too hard too young, particularly when they emphasize winning above all else, can easily wipe out a child’s motivation to play” (cited in Stenson).

Parents have been and always will be a son or daughter’s biggest fan, but sometimes they forget that what’s best for their child’s health is more important than winning or being the best. All-time-high college tuition rates and media coverage promoting the glories of professional athletics only edge parents more to want their kids to be the best in order to snatch those few coveted scholarships. *Bloomberg Businessweek* writer Mark Hyman asserts that having a son or daughter who is a professional athlete is often a parent’s secret dream and “media coverage of gargantuan pro contracts has more parents than ever smitten with the idea of Becky one day playing center court at Wimbledon” (par. 4). That “center court,” however, is more often than not unattainable. Art Young, the director of Urban Youth Sports at Northeastern University’s Center for the Study of Sports in Society, computed the following statistic: “only 1 out of every 50,000 high school athletes will ever become a part of a professional team” (qtd. in Leavy 34). With statistics that low, a child is more likely to wind up permanently injured or under-educated due to overtraining.

It’s hard to draw a line between what is too much and what is enough, and criticizing all parents who push their kids too hard isn’t the best solution. Michael Bergeron, assistant professor of pediatrics at the Medical College of Georgia in Augusta, urges parents to be attuned to their children: “if kids truly hate a sport, then let them quit” (Stenson). Most parents have good intentions and just want their kids to be happy

and successful athletes, but sometimes they are so blinded by the superstardom that the well-being and true happiness of the child gets put aside (Hyman). It takes enormous amounts of commitment, desire, and sacrifice that not every young star athlete will have or will even want to have. So, parents, take some time to just listen to your kids. Your dreams may not always be theirs.

I'm lucky because my mother, after working as a psychiatric nurse for years, was an expert at listening, and even though she didn't agree at first, she understood that I did not want to pursue swimming any further. The following year opened up numerous doors because for the first time in years I had time to do activities like an internship with the sports medicine program at the high school or actually traveling with my soccer team to tournaments. Then came along little Will Peters, an eight-year-old on my summer swim team who was desperate to learn a flip-turn. He asked me for help one day after practice and after an hour of flips and head bumps, I realized one thing: I loved coaching. I started coaching my summer swim team, and sacrificed hours and hours during the summer to be with the kids. My Sunday nights during the school year were also devoted to teaching 9- and 10-year-olds. The way I saw it, I was using my talent in a different way than people expected. I knew every possible drill and technique swimming could throw at me, and I knew how to teach it to kids in a way they could understand. The feeling of my fingertips out-touching the girl next to me in race could not beat the high five I got from little Will Peters when he dropped six seconds from his 50-meter backstroke—with a legal flip turn, I might add.

Somewhere along the way, the sports community lost the value of having kids like Will Peters and chose only to focus on the ones who know how to win. Lute Olson, a former University of Arizona basketball coach, emphasized that "The bottom line in youth sports should not be based on pressure to win. Instead, it should be on the enjoyment of competing and the opportunity to develop positive attitudes toward other people" (qtd. in Smith and Smoll 1). Growing up, all my coaches said that sports were 10 percent talent and 90 percent heart. Well, I've seen too many athletes burn out at age ten because they had the talent, but under all the pressure, they lost the heart. It is possible to train a kid with no talent, but passion is a value you just can't instill. They have to want it. I had that passion, but it wasn't for swimming. I found it in coaching and playing soccer even though I knew I would never get on the cover of a Wheaties box. For me, the best satisfaction came from knowing I did my best, not from winning. From all my experience, I hope as a coach I can recognize how much to push and to remember that the child's well-being is most important.

Six years ago, my plan was to continue swimming and get a scholarship to the University of Michigan, one of the best swimming schools in the country. Today, as a freshman at James Madison University, I love being a part of the club soccer team and being at a school I picked based on academics instead of swimming record. Anyone can be born with natural talent, but it is the passion for the sport that makes great athletes what they are. Just because a kid is good at sports in no way means they are obligated to pursue it if that means sacrificing happiness. All the hype within the sports community has pushed aside what should be the biggest part of youth sports today: the heart behind it. So next time, just take a step back and realize that winning isn't everything, and when it comes down to it, all those trophies are just plastic.

#### Works Cited

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