

Parents Role in Success

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By Peter Bidstrup



Courtesy of Peter Bidstrup

Peter Bidstrup has been the head boys' lacrosse coach at The Governor's Academy in Byfield, Massachusetts since 1996. Over the last decade, the "Red Dogs" have a record of 153-15 while winning or sharing 8 Independent School League championships. His daughter, Brett, plays lacrosse at Williams College, and son, Larsen, plays at Harvard.

At the beginning of each season, he shares a letter with the parents to set expectations and let them know how they can help. He started doing it after being inspired by a letter Virginia coach Dom Starsia shared with US Lacrosse and Lacrosse Magazine in 2006. Here is Bidstrup's letter to the parents of his 2016 team. There's some great information in there for all parents.

Dear Parents,

As we prepare for our competitive season, I wanted to share some thoughts with you. This is a letter that has evolved for many seasons, and one that I hope will help your boys to have the best experience they can, individually but more importantly, as a team. As a parent, you play a key role in the success of our team. As a parent of two college aged kids of my own, what follows is partly my take on being a good sports parent, and partly how you can help and support the Red Dogs. You may not agree with everything I say here. That's OK, but I want you to know where I stand.

The Red Dogs have three core values as a team, and also a motto. We talk a lot about this stuff and as coaches our goal is that it becomes part of who we are as a team and as individuals. The core values are: "Selfless" "Committed" and "Creative." Our motto is "Never Give Up." When we self-evaluate, we reflect on these words and ask ourselves how we are measuring up.

Your boys no doubt need and expect your support. They may not often say that to you, but it's true. And you don't need to be overly vocal on the sidelines to make your support known to them. A simple "good luck today" or "give it your best" is enough for them to know you're there. Which brings me to my next point: As a coach, I try very hard to impart to the boys that all we can do is give it our very best

shot. We can control the process – the work, the preparation, the approach, the attitude. But we can't control the outcome. We can't control the weather, the officiating, or injuries. And the opponent always has a say. We can't control how good the other team is. So we don't really focus on "winning" – because we can't control that part. In fact, I try not to use that word too much – even though our goal is always to win the game, and for many years that part has taken care of itself pretty well. But we know that if we prepare the best we can, if we try hard and stay positive, if we do our best to execute and support our teammates . . . if we work together as a team, then we'll give ourselves the best chance to win. And that's the irony. We try to stay in the process, we don't focus on the outcome. Because if we focus on the outcome (winning/losing), it messes up the process (players tighten up and get nervous), which in turn affects the outcome! Life works that way too right?

In my opinion, the best thing you can say to your son is to encourage him to give it his very best – in practice, every day. You can encourage him to support his team mates, take advice willingly from his coaches, and to stay positive and team-oriented. I stay in touch with many of my former players, the oldest of whom are approaching 40. What they remember is the feeling of being part of a team. They remember what it means to be a Red Dog. The work, the commitment, the togetherness. The laughs, the tears. Being part of something bigger than themselves. That's where we are going with this group. That stuff lasts a lifetime. And if we can hang another banner on the alumni gym wall, that's a bonus.

After a game, players tend to need time to come back from being a "performer" to being just a regular kid. They need time and space. And though I'm sure they want to see you, they probably don't want

to talk a lot about the game, or about specifics. I know they don't want to answer questions. Even when we win, players tend to think about ways they can improve, they process stuff from the game for hours afterwards. And that's good in general. What they really don't need is advice or criticism in those moments after a game. Knowing you are there and seeing you is sometimes all that is necessary. They just want you to be mom or dad. They already have a coach.

Sometimes knowing you are there and not seeing you is fine too. Kids don't want us as parents to be invested too much in what they do – because if we care too much we suggest that it's as (or more) important to us as parents than to them as kids. It's their thing – let them own it, and be careful not to let on that you are making too big a deal about it lest they think you are more invested in "their" thing than you really should be – or worse, more invested in it than they are. And that's different than wanting to know what they are up to on a weekend or where they are going. I'm talking strictly about the sport here, not other areas though I'd say a similar approach works best with academics and other activities as well. Be supportive, be interested, but the kids need to know it's their thing not ours.

Cheer for all the players, not just your own son. Better yet, cheer for other players more than you cheer for your own. That reinforces the notion of team. I tell our guys that everyone on the team has a role, everyone has a purpose, everyone has an equal stake in how we do. Some play more than others in games because some are more talented. I tell them too that being a good athlete doesn't make them a good person. Being nice, and being kind to others matters a whole lot more than being a great athlete. I also tell them that they should try to define themselves by a lot of other factors than lacrosse, or sports. Because someday relatively soon, sports will be over and they

will have to be the person they are going to be. Hopefully their athletic experience, and their experience of being a Red Dog will help them in their post sports journey. At least that's how I approach all of this.

Ok – Enough philosophy. But I think it's important for you to know where I am on this stuff.

Over the years I've been at plenty of games – both at Govs, in town and elsewhere and heard plenty of parents scream at referees. Never in that time have I seen a referee change a call because he got yelled at by a parent. More often than not, I think that kind of thing works against a team. We tell our players all the time to keep their mouths shut when the ref makes a call. We can't play the game without referees. I know most of them and they are regular guys – nice guys who like to stay involved with the sport. If there's a problem, I try to address it. They try their best. They are human and most of the time they get it right. So please, please stay off the referees. It's unbecoming for our school, our Red Dog group, and in theory I am supposed to address it if and when it occurs. I'd really not like to be in that position during a game.

I expect from time to time there will be a player and or fan(s) from an opponent who are less than sportsmanlike – everyone makes mistakes in the heat of the moment. On our team we tell our guys to stay above the garbage, honor the game and play to the best of their ability. If an opponent does the wrong thing, we'll take the penalty and hopefully score. But please under no circumstances say anything to an opposing player (or coach or fan) that isn't positive. Our players hear our coaches compliment opposing players pretty regularly. And,

as I tell our players – we all share something in common. Probably a lot more than our players think. Our opponents bring out the best in us. We can't play the game without them. They are all good kids.

We are so fortunate to have such a great group of players and parents involved with our school, and lacrosse program. Thanks for all of your support.

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