

GROWING CHAMPIONS FOR LIFE

Positive Strategies for Helping Kids Win at Life and Sports

What to Teach Your Athletes When Their Sports Stars Behave Badly

by David Benzel



What would you say these athletes have in common?

O.J. Simpson

Roger Clemens

Jose Canseco

Marion Jones

Lance Armstrong

Michael Vick

Mark McGwire

Chad Johnson

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Perhaps you would notice that most of them compromised their values in some way. It probably resulted in bad choices that embarrassed their teams, families, and friends. In many cases, apologies had to be made, and in some of the scenarios, legal action was taken.

You may also recognize the names on this second list:

Sam Bradford

Monica Seles

Arthur Ashe

Payne Stewart

Grant Hill

Tim Tebow

Tony Dungy

John Wooden

These athletes chose a different way to handle themselves. Instead, they were faithful to show a sense of character throughout their athletic careers.

Sports psychologist, Jim Loehr, in his book, *The Only Way to Win* uses these two lists to demonstrate how strong morals **don't always** match the exceptional talent in star athletes.

He makes a strong case that here in America we are not concerned ENOUGH with character issues. **And this fact hits close to home when we realize our young athletes are watching and sometimes copying the behaviors of questionable characters.**

How can you help your child look past the performance and see the person?

Here are 3 questions you can use to open up a conversation between you and your athlete, regarding their sports heroes.

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1) Who Do You Admire?

Sometimes if we don't ask, we don't know. And this can be the case when it comes to who your child puts up on a pedestal. Not all kids will be vocal about the superstars they are watching and emulating.



That is why it is essential for you to occasionally ask this question, **“Who do you admire?”**

If your child is reluctant to answer or is not really sure, it may be helpful to brainstorm through some of the current and trending names in their sport.

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If you discover that someone has caught their attention, learn what you can by doing a bit of research on your end. Know what is praiseworthy about this athlete and if there are any reasons for concern regarding character issues.

2) What Do You Admire?

Now it is time to dig a little deeper.

Ask your child, “What specifically do you admire about your favorite competitor? It’s likely that they will mention some of the technical skills that their VIP athlete has mastered. They might even applaud the effort it took for them to get to their position.

But it’s vital for you to make the distinction between the performance and the person. If you ask your child to think about what kind of person the superstar is outside of sports, you can get them to realize that talent and character are two different things.

Talk with them about the qualities that you value and that are demonstrated on and off the field – things like:

- Kindness
- Gratefulness
- Humility
- Responsibility
- Integrity
- Trustworthiness

Challenge your athlete to keep an eye out for these traits in the athletes they are watching. Point out to them that just because someone is talented does not necessarily mean that they are nice to be around – or worthy of praise.

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3) Why Do You Admire?

Not only is it important to figure out the reasons why your child admires a particular competitor but it is equally valuable to look at why he **should** admire – at all.

When we look at top level athletes who are winning at sports but losing at life, it may be tempting to throw our hands up in the air and give up on finding anyone worthy of our child's admiration.

But positive role models in sports can and do help athletes grow and develop. Watching the superstars in sports can provide:

- Inspiration
- Mental imagery
- Evidence that hard work pays off
- Examples of overcoming a challenge
- Teamwork in action

Final Thoughts

It's natural to look up to those who have made it to elite levels in the sports we love.

However, it is a valuable learning moment when you can help your athlete see that there is a difference between a performance and the person.

Be intentional about searching for the "real deal" or the "whole package" when it comes to who our young athletes are wanting to imitate.

Celebrate and admire talent when it is accompanied by character.

David Benzel is the Founder and Executive Director of [Growing Champions for Life, Inc.](http://GrowingChampionsforLife.com), which provides parents and coaches with practical tools & positive strategies for helping athletes reach their full potential while enjoying the youth sport experience. David is also the author of *"From Chump to Champ - How Individuals Go From Good to Great"* www.growingchampionsforlife.com