



“Helping Your Kids Choose Worthy Sports Role Models”

By Dr. George A. Selleck

EduSports Blue Paper for Schools & Parents

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Many years ago when I was a young graduate student at Stanford, I had the opportunity to work for Ty Cobb—the Hall of Fame player who, at his retirement in 1928, held 90 MLB records (some of which still stand today). The once-talented player was a bitter, lonely old man whose bad behavior both on and off the field had alienated most of the people he came in contact with. He had wealth and fame but no family or friends to share it with.

That’s why, if one of my children had ever said to me, “You know, Dad, when I grow up I want to be like Ty Cobb,” my first response would have been, “Are you *crazy*?”

Many parents today find themselves in similar situations as they watch their children profess admiration for professional athletes whose behaviors are less than admirable. WHAT CAN YOU DO TO HELP YOUR CHILDREN PICK GOOD sports ROLE MODELS?

1. Help your children understand the difference between heroes and role models. The most common concept of a hero is someone who, as one college professor put it, “overcomes his human frailties to face a particular crisis or do what has to be done for a given moment in time.” Thus, an athlete who shakes off being beamed by a wild pitch and goes on to hit a game-winning home run could be seen as a hero, even if that same athlete is facing charges of tax evasion. A role model, however, is someone who tends to have an ongoing, positive influence on people—such as the teacher who always makes time to help kids after school.

2. Listen to why your children look up to certain athletes. While you may be focused on an athlete's negative behaviors, all that your child may see is a person who always rises to the occasion for his or her team even when they are sick or injured. These kinds of people are inspirational, and all of us need to have that kind of inspiration in our lives.
3. Recognize that it is human to sometimes admire negative characteristics in people. Children, especially—who often feel they are constantly being judged—have a tendency to admire athletes who don't seem to care what people think about them.
4. Help your children identify the characteristics they admire about different athletes and why they admire these characteristics. Hopefully, you can make the point along the way that great athletic ability doesn't automatically qualify a person to be a role model in all aspects of life. As you help your children make the distinction between athletic ability and personal behavior, let them know it is okay to admire the way a person plays but not necessarily the way they behave.
5. Share thoughts about who you admire with your kids. Hopefully you can think of some well-known athletes that are role models for you because of the way they conduct themselves.
6. Be a sports role model for your children. That doesn't mean you need to play the game well—or play the game at all. It means being respectful of umpires and opposing players, coaches and fans. It means being supportive of your child's coach and teammates (and your child, of course!). It means being a student of the game and always trying to improve your knowledge. It means admitting when you

make a mistake or when your behavior has been less than exemplary, and trying to do better.

The reality is kids are always going to look up to athletes and pattern themselves after their sports heroes. Given this fact, look at this as an opportunity to help your children learn how to thoughtfully analyze the qualities they admire in sports figures and make more informed choices when it comes to picking heroes, role models, and leaders.

About the Author

George A. Selleck, Ph.D, M.Div, M.A., the director of Sports for Life Education Programs and the cofounder of Parents for Good Sports, is a counseling psychologist with more than 35 years of professional expertise. He has successfully integrated his knowledge of human behavior and his experience as an accomplished athlete and coach to become a national sports workshop specialist and recognized author in the field of sports education. He has presented seminars to hundreds of organizations, including the NBA Rookie Transition Program, the American Basketball Coach's Association, the American Football Coach's Association, Anaheim Unified School District, and more. Dr. Selleck is a former CIF Player of the Year and Stanford All-American, and is a member of the Stanford Basketball Hall of Fame. He was twice named the Los Angeles Times High School Coach of the Year.

Dr. Selleck is on the Advisory board of Edusports.

About EduSports

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