

My Son's Favorite Sport is Soccer. Isn't It?

By Jeff D. Opdyke

Sometimes parents see what they want to see. And in doing so, they miss a lot.

Case in point: my long-held belief that my son, now 14 years old, loves soccer.

Turns out, I was wrong. After the fall season ended, he announced his retirement.

He finally told me that while he enjoys the game, he isn't as passionate about it as I am. I had just assumed he was because...well, because I wanted to believe it.

The whole experience has been unsettling, and it has forced me to ask myself some difficult questions: Was he putting in all those hard hours just to please me? Did I ignore obvious signs that he wasn't having as much fun as I thought he was? And might he have loved the game, if only I hadn't pushed him to do it more and better?

I don't know all the answers, and I probably never will. But I am convinced of one thing: We parents so often want to believe that our kids share our passions that we're unable -- and often unwilling -- to accept the truth, even when it's in plain sight.

It's embarrassing now, but I've written frequently about my son and soccer. I've described his talent and passion for the game. And I've talked about the sacrifices the family was making so he could pursue his soccer-loving dreams: the endless travel, the out-of-state soccer camps, the time we all spent away from home to attend his practices (two nights a week) and games (as many as four in a weekend).

I was proud of his accomplishments. For several years he played at the highest level, on traveling teams that roamed our home state of Louisiana and the Southeast. He scored goals, and medals hang from a shelf in his bedroom from the various tournaments he and his teammates won from Louisiana to Florida.

Now, though, I see he was just living my dream, not his. All those sacrifices in truth reflected my desire to see him excel in a sport I adore rather than one that resonated with him.

As one of my longtime friends says, "You're so happy believing that your kid loves what you love that you get blinded. And if they're good, it's even harder to see. You just assume their talent means they love what they're doing."

My friend says that because he had loved baseball as a kid, he introduced it to his son at a very young age. His son, in turn, grew up to play the game very well. "I figured he loved it because he was so good at it," my friend says. "But he was actually good at it because I started playing with him so young. It had nothing to do with his own love for the game."

And then one day, at about 12, his son stopped playing. "He told me he never really liked it, and he started playing soccer, which he loved. He was a star, even more than at baseball. And more important: He enjoyed it. I had never noticed how much he didn't feel that way about baseball."

I suffered from that same blindness. Looking back, I now recognize that my son never really expressed much emotion about soccer, other than frustration, which I wrote off as teenage moodiness because I didn't want to believe it was the sport.

It's easy for me to now see that his growing frustration was one of many signs I refused to acknowledge.

He celebrated tournament victories with teammates on the field, but off the field he never talked about the sport. He grumbled about the number of practices and games. He never wanted to go to my games, and wasn't interested in watching soccer on TV with me. He stopped kicking the ball with me in the yard, and when he got really frustrated at some soccer comment I'd make he'd say, "Dad, it's not like I'm growing up to be a soccer star, so stop."

I asked my son where I went wrong and what signs parents should be looking for.

"You didn't pay attention to the fact that I wasn't living up to my potential," he told me. "You saw it -- I was jogging when I should have been running, and I began to complain about practice -- and you made some comments about it. But you didn't realize it meant I wasn't having fun anymore."

He's absolutely right.

He also told me I pushed him subtly to accept an invitation to join the best team in the state, even though he was reluctant to do so. Had I not done that (and had he not had such an unpleasant time on that team), he might still be playing today.

Quitting, he said, was hard on him, "because I didn't want to disappoint you because I know you love watching me play, and you love traveling as a family to my games and staying in hotels together."

I assured him that I am not disappointed -- that I'm happy he acted from his heart rather than from mine. More important, I told him that I'm very happy he has found his own passion: golf.

He came to the game through his friends at school, and he loves the sport. He eagerly signed up for lessons. He's happy to go to practice and wants to hit the driving range several times a week, even when it's 30 degrees outside. He wants me to play with him. He talks about golf all the time, and watches it on TV. He practices in the front yard, which he never did with soccer.

In short, he's finding far more satisfaction in his own sport than he ever did when he was simply trying to please Dad.