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Behind every Olympian is heart of gold

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While fans roar their approval as swimmers grind it out below, a solitary figure sits high in the darkened stands, tapping away at the laptop balanced on her knees.

Debbie Phelps is there to watch her famous son compete in his final tuneup before the U.S. Olympic swimming trials, close enough to be supportive but at a distance that clearly says it's all Michael's show.

"I take this as Michael's job. The pool deck is his office," Debbie Phelps explains later. "Once the competition starts, he doesn't need me. Only Michael can swim the race."

Being the parent of an elite athlete means hanging out at the soft edges of the spotlight - paying the bills, driving the well-traveled path to practices, being there to listen in good times and bad - while not disrupting the bond between coach and pupil.

That low-key job description means parents are often overlooked cogs in the production of Olympic prodigies. But athletes and coaches say they're vital.

"Ultimately, you've got to have the parent in some level of cooperation or it's never going to work. It's critical to this process," says Murray Stephens, founder of the North Baltimore Aquatic Club, which produced Phelps and women's standout Katie Hoff.

Parents toe a fine line between staying involved and getting in the way. Once they cross it, they become the subjects of intra-club sniping or, worse, of blaring headlines decrying the bullying of officials, coaches and children.

Caroline Silby, a sports psychologist and former member of the U.S. figure skating team, says "healthy parental involvement is an illusive standard" with "no magic formula" to achieve it.

"Parents have to consider what's best for the child. The coach's job is to develop a champion," she says.

To help provide some guidance, Silby wrote "Champion or Child: How to Encourage Without Being Pushy" for the parents' newsletter for USA Gymnastics. In it, she outlined six things parents can do to build a healthy relationship: Give affection, help focus goals, be flexible, interact but don't dominate, provide perspective and



be a good role model.

"Parents shouldn't try to be the experts. Kids want to be the experts in the sport. They're spending all their time and energy - physically and emotionally - to get good. One of the things they're being taught is to coach themselves in competitive situations. They don't need another layer," Silby says.

Even if they didn't know it, Hoff's parents followed Silby's model perfectly.

Jeanne Hoff still holds the all-time scoring record in women's basketball at Stanford University. Her husband, John, played sports for fun. But neither knew much about swimming when their daughter took up the sport.

"She was pretty obsessed in those early days, hyper-focused," Jeanne Hoff says. "To us, this was an activity Katie was doing. We weren't immersed in it."

She gradually began learning a little about the sport so as to have the proper responses when Katie discussed her practices and meets. While her daughter swam, Hoff got involved in other activities: fundraising for the club and training to become a meet official.

"We both found our niches," Jeanne Hoff says. "It was really very easy with Katie because she was so motivated."

Former athletic prodigies say parents can play a unique and important role by not passing judgment, as a coach might.

Beth Botsford, a two-time Olympic gold medalist in 1996 who trained with Stephens at NBAC, says her parents "weren't stopwatch parents. They weren't in the stands, clocking splits."

"I could have [had] the worst swim of my life and been really angry and disappointed with myself. But without fail, they'd give me a hug and say, 'You did well. You looked great,'" she says. "They never made me feel like I was Beth, their daughter the swimmer. I was always Beth, their daughter."

The same was true for Theresa Andrews, another NBAC swimmer who won two Olympic gold medals in 1984. "Win or lose, my mom would always say, 'Where do you want to eat?' They didn't coach my stroke. That was Murray [Stephens'] job. A child should never see the dip of disappointment in their parents' faces."

On the other hand, Silby cautions that it's not a good idea to gush over a budding star.

"Athletes don't want to be praised just to be praised. They can see right through it," she says. "What they want is to hear reasonable assessments of their performances. Otherwise, they begin to think, 'Wow, people expect great things from me because I'm so great.' Over time, they can become fearful of a challenge because they become afraid of failing. They reach a comfort zone and start to underperform."

There are plenty of examples - and an entire Web site devoted to them - of sports parents behaving badly. Perhaps the two most notable cases involved tennis parents. In 1993, Jim Pierce, the father of Mary Pierce, was banned from Wimbledon and other events in which his daughter was entered for verbally abusing officials and getting into a fistfight. Seven years later, Damir Dokic, the father and coach of rising Australian star Jelena Dokic, was escorted from the grounds at Wimbledon and barred from the U.S. Open for boorish behavior.

Olympic parents and athletes say they see hints of such behavior all the time, when adults sometimes lose

sight of the fact that young athletes "are someone's kids," Debbie Phelps says.

But those are the exceptions rather than the rule, says Stephens, who has encountered "a few" difficult parents and heard some sniping in the parking lot about favoritism toward certain athletes. His club has always banned parents from the pool deck during practice and competition, lest they lapse into coaching or overzealous rooting.

Overzealous sports parents have almost become a cliché, and coaches say athletes are often more to blame when their careers flame out or go astray.

Stephens says he has had cases of a great kid and bad parents, but "sadly, enough, though, I've had other cases where the parents were just great but the kids weren't up to speed. I would rather get rid of the kid and keep the parents."

How do sports parents learn their ideal roles?

The USA Swimming Web site has a section on parent education, but most adults pick it up by watching.

"The more you tell them, the more complicated it gets," Stephens says. "There's always another piece of information you haven't told them yet. We try and give them some basic information and then encourage them to take a ride with us."

Parents, Silby says, can provide perspective.

"Don't ignore failure," she says. "If you do, you send a message that failure is so bad that we can't even deal with it. Kids, sometimes, need to experience a sense of loss. As a parent, you say: 'It didn't go well. Things didn't go your way. Guess what? It's OK. You got through it.'"

"That perspective, in turn, may lead the youngster to say: 'I didn't do a personal best. I swam slow. Now what actions am I going to take?'" Silby says.

Three-time Olympian Dominique Dawes, who coaches and runs gymnastics clinics, says having Olympic dreams is good for youngsters and parents, but only if they are in perspective.

"It's not glamorous. All the athletes who made the Olympics, they sacrificed a lot ... physically, the coaches and their families sacrifice a lot for you. There's financial commitments, mental bumps and bruises that you have to go through," the gold medalist says. "A lot of times when parents come up to me, I try to put things in perspective and say, 'This is what it took me to get to my first Olympics.'"

"They're like: 'Whoa, we were just looking at the end of the rainbow. We didn't think about all that it takes.' A lot of parents then have to sit down and think about, 'Is this something I want to put my daughter through or is this something she would want to put herself through?' because it's not just about the physical aspect."

Kevin Botsford said when his daughter Beth swam at NBAC, the club had a parents' meeting every September to pair newcomers with veterans who could explain how things worked. Coaches laid out performance expectations for each age group.

"My wife and I, our only role was to support the kids," Botsford says. "We might talk to them about swimming as long as we never questioned the coaches."

In return, the coaches respected their roles as parents.

At Beth's last meet in the 12-and-under age bracket, in which she was expected to set two age-group records, the swimmer and her mother, Elaine, had an argument and Beth behaved badly. Elaine Botsford said Beth couldn't swim and had to go home. NBAC coaches backed her mother.

"The kids," Botsford says of NBAC's philosophy, "aren't the stars."

The best advice Dawes can give parents of blossoming stars: "Don't let the media raise your kids. Set standards and insist they live by them. You should, too."

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