

On Having Your Cake and Eating It, Too!

by Dr. Elliot Johnson

Most parents believe in the values of youth sports for kids. That's why we encourage them to play. We drive our children all over the country because we care about both their enjoyment of the game and their character development.

We also believe in time together on family vacations and the value of showing children other parts of the country. Sometimes the value of commitment to a team and the value of family time for an extended period are in conflict. Is there any way we can "have our cake and eat it, too" ?

The agony of missing even one game for a family vacation remains in the back of this writer's mind. No matter where the family was planning to travel, it wasn't as good as playing a baseball game! Granted, this feeling is not that common to all children. As a 48-year old college coach, I still haven't gotten enough good baseball! But there were worthwhile experiences shared with my family that I treasure too. Summer trips to both coasts, all the sights along the way, and the family jokes we still share from those experiences enriched my life. Missing one (even two!) games doesn't seem like such a big deal now compared to the times shared with the family. After all, we did see Cooperstown, visit Yankee Stadium, Shea Stadium, and the Louisville Slugger bat factory along the way!

So how can the conflict of interest between team loyalty and family values be minimized? First, parents can be supportive of the coach and of all team functions. The game and the team are important. If there aren't values inherent in playing on a well-coached team, we ought not to play in the first place. We acknowledge and support the time demands of all practices and games.

If a family has a week of vacation planned, it is wise to inform the coach before the season begins. It may be possible to select a week where the child's absence is least felt. Knowing the value of time with their kids, parents can require pre-adolescents to vacation with them (I would never have said this as a kid!). Adolescents can be given a choice. If the coach knows of a missed week before the season begins, it helps him or her in planning.

A wise coach can strengthen commitment to both the team and the family. The coach can point out to other players that while "Johnny is an important part of our team, he is also an important part of another more permanent team - his family. This other team, of which he'll always be a part, needs him for a week, so we'll be playing without him." All players who are fortunate enough to have families who spend time together can be handled likewise. Pressure is thus removed from the player, the team will understand his absence, and the family tie is strengthened. If coaches and parents work together, both can "eat their cake and have it, too!"