



September is NC Youth Soccer Positive Cheer Month

"Things My Mother Never Said To Me" (by Tony Earp)

I truly believe nobody accomplishes anything on their own. Success is a combination of individual effort and surrounding yourself with the right people who will influence your life in the correct way. I was fortunate enough to have a mom who loved me dearly and would do anything necessary to make sure I had the best chance to be successful. As a kid, my success on and off the soccer field was a direct result of a lot of hard work (because I am not overly gifted in any capacity), and the discipline instilled in me by my mom in every aspect of my life.

My mom would often say to me, **"You can only control what you do."** With this in mind, she rarely ever allowed me to blame other people or look anywhere but internally on the reason for, or the result of, my actions. This is a tough thing to stick by because there are a lot of times in life that you do everything you are suppose to and things do not work out the way we want. It is usually at those times we look for external reasons for "why" and will point blame to a person, group, or organization. My mom would never allow me to do that. She always refocused me to learn from the experience and work harder the next time around.

It may have been different times when I was a kid, and I will never tell a parent how to raise a child or to not step in when their child is being treated unfairly. All parents have the urge to protect their child and want their child to have the best opportunities to be successful. But when do parents step in too much? Even with the best intentions, by parents protecting their kids from negative situations, they can create situations for their kids that actually will have long-term negative effects. On the surface, it looks like the right thing to do, and may have a short-term benefit, but will have negative effects on the child moving forward.

As a soccer coach, I hear a lot of things said by parents to me or their kids that my mom never said to me growing up. I attribute my success on the field to my

*mom avoiding these comments and not allowing me to make excuses or justify disappointment in the wrong way. By avoiding the comments below, my mom forced me to always focus internally and never make excuses for myself or others. My high school team won 3 state championships, I received a full scholarship to play at Ohio State University, I was a four year starter for the Buckeyes, and captain my senior year. I am convinced the only reason I made it to that level and had success, not being overly athletic or talented, is my mom forced me to take responsibility for everything that happened to me on and off the field. Her most common advice to me was, "**work harder next time.**" The sentiment stuck.*

Below is a sample of comments I hear all the time. As a coach, I cringe every time I hear them. Maybe because I never heard them growing up from my mom.

"My child is not being challenged enough."

My mom never said this to a coach when I was growing up. If I ever came home from a training session and said, "Practice was easy today," my mom would reply, "**Then, you did not work hard enough.**"

She did not even humor the idea that maybe I was not being pushed hard enough by the coach or the coach was making me do training activities that were "below my level of play." Her immediate reaction was to let me know that how hard I worked was completely under my control. If I felt practice was easy, I just did not put forth enough effort. Case closed.

Am I taking the coach completely off the hook, absolutely not! It is critical for coaches to try to challenge every player and push them to excel. But being challenged is more internal than it is external. For example, if an athlete is asked to run a mile, it may not be a challenging distance for the athlete. The player may be in great shape so a mile run is not challenging at all (on the surface). If the player wanted the mile to be challenging, all the player would need to do is try to run the mile as fast as possible, maybe try to break his/her record, or to put it simply, the player would make the choice to make the activity challenging.

My point is players can control how challenging any activity or environment can be for them. Playing with more skilled or less skilled players, doing complicated or simple training activities, or the duration of activity are not the only reasons something is challenging.

Many parents reaction to a child indicating they are not being challenged it to search out other types of training or a higher level team. I am not saying this is not a good idea at times, but at times it is a quick fix to a deeper issue that goes unaddressed. The child does not put forth the effort required and the

reason for that is being put on everyone else but the child. In time, this will hurt the kid's ability to continue to develop down the road. Anytime a situation is not "ideal" for the player, the excuse of "I am not being challenged enough" will be an acceptable reason for their lack of success and effort.

"My child should play in a different position."

I came home from a game when I was 13 and told my mom that I think I should be playing forward. Up until that season, I had always played forward and did very well. This coach however felt I was better in the midfield. When I expressed my frustration to my mom, she politely listened but did not give me her opinion or express concern about me playing the new position. My team was having a hard time scoring goals and I was certain I could make more of an impact playing as a forward where I can score more goals versus playing in the midfield. I added the fact that I did not feel as comfortable in the midfield as I did as a forward.

When my mom got tired of hearing me complain about my position with the team, she said something that I will never forget. She cut me off in mid-complaint and sternly said, "Are you a good player?" Stunned by the question, I stuttered, "y-ea." She moved to eye level with me and said, **"Then it should not matter where you play. If you are really that good, you can be great anywhere on the field. If you can't, then you have more work to do."**

Again, my mom took my complaint that I was being cheated out of playing my best by my coach's decision and turned it right around on me. Her point was not subtle and quick to the point. I was an upset teenager by my mom's lack of support and apathetic attitude towards my displeasure with the team, but deep down, I knew she was right. Although not easy to accept and it meant more work for me, I was ultimately in control of how well I played. With a slight change in my attitude and a refocus back on what I can do to improve, I did what was necessary to find success in the new position.

It should be noted I played center mid in college.

"My child should have made that team."

There were several occasions when I was a youth player that I was not selected for a team. There were times I know I did not deserve to be on the team, but there were other situations where I knew the coaches made a mistake or I was overlooked in the process. Although the disappointment was tough to bear at times, I know it helped me deal with adversity later on in life.

When I would vent to my mom, she was a great sounding board and she allowed me to get out everything I needed to say to let out my frustration with

not making the team. She was very supportive and always tried to make me feel better. But, she NEVER told me I should have made the team.

My mom would tell me I am a good player and I worked very hard during training, but she never told me that I got looked over, it was not fair, or some other player was wrongly selected over me. All she told me was "**next time, do more to make sure they HAVE to take you.**" Again, although deep down she may have felt I did get over looked or it was "political", she never let me know that. She felt it was more important for me to view it as a challenge to work harder the next time around and continue to get better.

My mom could have complained to the coaches and pointed out how her son played for this team or was much better than this player. My mom could have accused the coaches of taking players they "liked" or "knew" from their own teams. My mom could have never let me try out again in protest to the gross injustice suffered by her son. But my mom never did any of that. Was she unsupportive? Was she not sticking up for her son?

In actuality, I think my mom was looking out for me. She wanted me to learn how to deal with disappointment and respond in a way that would help me not just in soccer but with other challenges I would face in my life. As we all know, life is not fair and at times we do not get what we probably deserve. Many respond by just pointing blame and deciding not to every try again because it will most likely end up with the same result. Others decide to work harder and use what they learned from failing to their advantage the next time around. Which one are you? If you are the latter, you should probably pick up the phone and thank your parents.

"I will talk to the coach."

Nope, never, not going to happen... if I had an issue with a coach, I always was forced to discuss it with the coach. My mom never stepped in and expressed concerns for me. I asked my mom why she always made me talk to the coach. Her response was not what I expected.

In short, my mom said to me she would never talk to the coach about what he was doing on the field because she would never expect him to talk to her about what she was doing with me at home. It was a simple point and again a very good one. Can you imagine if your soccer coach knocked on your parents' door and gave them suggestions how to be better parents? Her view was that he was the coach and she was the parent. She will do what she thinks is best for me and the coach will do what he thinks is best. Both will make mistakes and will need to learn from those errors.

With that in mind, my mom gave me the responsibility to discuss issues with my coach or any adult I felt it was necessary. When I was younger, she would

go with me, but would still make me talk. I know there were times she may not have agreed with the coach but she would never express her disagreement to me. Why? Probably because as soon as I knew my mom did not respect the coach's decision, she knew I would not respect the decision either. She would be giving me the "green light" to dismiss the coach anytime I did not agree with him.

There a lot of lessons my mom was teaching me by doing this, but I will not go into them all. Outside of taking responsibility and learning how to bring up concerns to people of authority in a respectful way, the most important lesson was probably the least obvious. By my mom refusing to talk with the coach, it made me really decide if my concern was important. When a parent will quickly bring up an issue with a coach, a player will be more likely to bring up every little thing seen as an issue with the parent because the parent will discuss it with the coach. When the kid is forced to have the discussion, the child will be a little more selective about what a REAL issue is and what is not.

"You are better than that player."

I would ask my mom if I was better than player "x" or player "y" because those players were getting more playing time than me or playing in a position I wanted to play. Whether I was better or worse did not matter much to my mom, or at least, she never made it the focus of the rest of the conversation.

In my mom's heart she probably thought I was the best player to ever wear soccer cleats. She loved watching me play and thought very highly of my ability and potential on the field, but she NEVER compared me to another player. She would let me know when I had good days and bad days, but she would not compare me to any other player on the field. There were no coaching points or suggestions on how to play better, but she would be honest about my level of play. Normally the comments would be limited to things like, "I have seen you play better" or "it just did not seem like your day." On the positive side it would be limited to, "You worked very hard today" or "It was a lot of fun to watch you play." She always made it just about me, positive at times and negative at other times. She was not afraid to let me know when it was not my best effort, but never slow to let me know I played well.

Honestly, I am not sure if I know how my mom felt about any of the players I ever played with. She never gave me specific feedback about any players on the field. Her comments about the rest of the team would be very general. She would always refer to the team and never about individual players. After games I would hear, "the team looked great" or "the team seemed a step slow today." This continued all the way through college.

My mom just focused on me most of the time. I was her focus and none of the other kids were her responsibility. She never spoke about me to other parents

or talked about other players with other parents. Although parents may ask, my mom deflected the questions and avoided those types of conversations. It just was not her concern and made a choice not to allow herself to be part of those discussions.

This kept me focused on me. We are quick at times to justify how well or poor we are doing based on others around us. My mom forced me to measure myself against myself. When using other players to decide how well I did can dangerously lower, or raise, my expectations for myself. It can create a false sense of success or a false sense of failure, depending who I would measure myself against. We all compare ourselves to others at times. It is unavoidable. But when you cut through all the distractions, you should measure success or failure against yourself. It takes a deep sense of awareness and the courage to accept the fact you did your best or you never even really tried. Both are hard to admit at times.

As parents and coaches, sometimes it is the things we do not say that have the biggest impact on a child's ability to be successful. Youth sports is not about the parents or the coaches, it is only about the kids. It is their time to play, learn, and grow. The kids need to experience success and failure, confidence and doubt, courage and fear, anger and joy, and everything else that comes with playing sports. My mom allowed me to experience them all. She did not shelter me from the bad or shower me with the good, and I never got to take the easy road to where I wanted to go.