

Daddy Ball — when a baseball dad who coaches his kid appears to give that player preferential treatment — is the number one complaint among parents. The coaches' kids (head and assistant coaches) get the most playing time, play the preferred positions and get all the glory — often when it isn't deserved.

At least, that is the consistent complaint.

As a baseball dad who coaches his sons, I'm hoping to shed some light on this from the other perspective.

The following is fictional, but some is certainly inspired by and drawn from my own experiences...

A Late Night

Your coach couldn't sleep last night. He was nervous about the upcoming tournament, unsure of the perfect combination that would lead his team to victory.

- He researched the pool play opponents to determine which would be most likely to put up a fight. He mapped out his pitching to use just enough to win without putting himself in a bind the next day.
- He's keeping an eye on which players are hitting and how that will impact his order. He's also taken a second look at the past tournament to see which players are trending up or down.
- He thinks he knows what he's going to do. He's created his lineups in Excel. He's planned out every inning of each game for tomorrow — even though he knows things are bound to

change. He's created alternate lineups, too, because he's prepared for certain things. Even blank lineups in case everything blows up.

- Your coach wants to carefully balance giving kids opportunities with putting kids in position to succeed. He also wants to reward the kids who have put in the extra work and earned their time.
- He moves kids around, but not to the point where they are uncomfortable or unprepared. Most players have two positions they focus on most. They learn those positions inside and out.
- While there is a lineup that is most likely to succeed, he's also sensitive to the stigma of hitting last or starting the game on the bench. So, he does his best to mix that up. He has a rotation of four kids who take turns batting last, and the same kid will never start consecutive games on the bench.

His primary lineup has his son hitting third and playing shortstop. He agonizes over this. He trusts his son and he knows he's earned it. The stats back it up. But he also sees the looks and hears the whispers.

He knows you think your son is better than his own. He hears you murmuring to the other dads even though you think he doesn't. He sees the look on your face when his son comes to the mound to pitch.

You don't attend all the practices, and you've missed a handful of games. Your coach understands this. But you don't see everything.

You don't see that your son misses signs. You don't see that your son jokes around at the worst possible times. You don't see that your son's focus is on his stats and not the team's success. You don't see your son drop his head and throw his bat after a strikeout.

Or you make excuses for it. "That's just the way he is," you say. "He's a passionate kid, and he can't stand to lose."

An Early Morning

Your coach didn't get much work done today. He needs to be sure he has everything ready before the one-hour drive to the game. And since he's the coach, he needs to be sure he's early.

The thing is, that's not the only thing that keeps him from working. He's naturally distracted. He loves coaching, but it's a full-time job — that gets no pay, of course.

Your coach's performance at work suffers. He knows business won't be as good during baseball season. He rejects requests to travel because of his commitment to the team. But he knows that's the sacrifice, and he wouldn't change it for the world.

He's often taking phone calls, texting or responding to emails during work hours about his baseball team. He leaves work early to get to practice 15 minutes before you do. He turns down weekend hours because of games.

He woke up tired because of a late night. He immediately scanned his email to find a long list of work requests and problems he

needs to take care of. A customer isn't happy. The boss may not be, too.

Of course, there's also an email from a parent letting him know that her son won't be at the tournament today. Forgot to tell him. Sorry.

Time to change the lineups...

Your coach then starts a group text with his assistants, strategizing on how best to adjust the lineups. The kid your coach will now be missing was slated to be one of your pitchers today.

Your coach sends a text to his older son, wishing him good luck in his game tonight. With multiple kids playing baseball, this is a common occurrence. He is left playing favorites for the son he coaches, missing out on the joy of watching his other son play.

He hopes that his older son understands. His mother will be there with him. She's been the older son's companion at all of his games. Unfortunately, that also means that she misses most of their younger son's games.

He thinks about this. He thinks about the appreciation he has for his wife for keeping everything together during the summer. Every day there's a practice or a game. There's almost always a meal on the table. She's making sure the boys are sun screened, fed, equipped and have their supply of water and sunflower seeds.

And she deals with his mood swings that are reserved for this time of the year. Angry parents. A kid who won't respond to direction. A

bad losing streak. She doesn't like it, but she handles it like a champ.

Your coach grimaces because he also knows that his wife's birthday is only three days away. He's done nothing for her. He's not sure when he will or what he'll do. He hates that their relationship takes a back seat during baseball season. While he isn't proud of it, he thinks she understands.

A Pleasant Drive

Your coach leaves a meeting early so that he can go home, pick up his son and head for the tournament. They load up the car with three buckets of baseballs, two bags, a hitting screen, his son's bag and a cooler. They then throw on their baseball playlist — a ritual that they share out of pleasure and superstition.

Your coach and his son chat about the tournament — the teams they are facing and what to be prepared for. His son is reminded to be selectively aggressive at the plate — hoping to avoid a repeat performance of a strike three call in the previous game.

His son is also reminded to be a good leader. To be vocal. To help a struggling player who is slumping. His son nods and smiles.

Your coach cherishes these moments almost as much as the games. His son does, too.

Warming Up Early

Your coach likes to get to practices and games early, well before anyone else. He likes the message it sends, but there's also a personal reason for this.

As soon as the team arrives, he is a coach to all the players. Prior to that moment, he is a dad.

Your coach and his son carry the equipment to their dugout. They always choose the first base dugout out of preference. Or maybe superstition. He likes coaching the base that is closest to the dugout to talk to the players before they walk to the plate. "Grab a ball."

After they get settled, your coach grabs his glove that he's had since high school. His son knows what this means, and they head out into the outfield for a catch.

They talk a little, but they mostly just enjoy the quiet. ***Glove foot forward. Catch it out in front, preferably on the throwing hand side. Step and throw. Reset quickly. Repeat.***

As he makes another throw, your coach feels the buzz of his phone. Another work email. Rumors of downsizing coming.

Glove foot forward. Catch it out in front, preferably on the throwing hand side. Step and throw. Reset quickly. Repeat.

The Game

The players show up, some early and some late. You show up late because of a work commitment. Your son joins his teammates five minutes into their pregame ritual.

You don't like being late, but there are some days you just can't leave early. Not everyone has the flexibility your coach has with his schedule. Certainly, he understands.

If not, screw that guy.

The game goes largely accordingly to your coach's plans, of course with some exceptions. The starting pitcher struggled a little, so he was pulled an inning early. The left fielder writhed in agony after tripping at first base on a groundout — a ritual for that player when things go wrong, making it difficult to know when he's truly hurt. So, he sat an inning he wasn't supposed to sit.

It's a hard-fought game. In the bottom of the sixth, your coach turns to his son to close it out. You roll your eyes toward a couple of dads along the fence. They return a similar reaction.

The first batter strikes out. The second drops a bloop hit to right and promptly steals second. The third walks. The fourth pops out to first base.

Your coach is a coach to all these kids. But he feels the stress through his son. He doesn't want to make him more nervous, so with the other team's best hitter at the plate, he calls time and has an assistant talk to him.

You, like many parents, think your coach loves these moments. Giving his son the glory.

The truth is it eats him up inside. He wants him to succeed. He wants to share the big moments with his son. But he also can't stand to see the pain when he fails.

As the coach, he also knows that he puts his son in this position. So, when the deep depression of failure sets in for his son, he can't help but feel responsible.

With each pitch, the pressure mounts. An 0-2 count goes full, the third ball on a borderline pitch. That big power hitter then drives a double into the gap in right center that scores two runs.

Game over.

You turn and shout to yourself in anger. You know that your son would have iced the game. He's always done well — at least when his teammates aren't making errors in the field.

If only you could be the coach. You never would have let this happen.

You can't be the coach, of course. There's just no way with your workload. You just don't have the time. Your coach has asked you to help in the past, but you declined.

If you were the coach, though, the coach's kid would play in the outfield and hit seventh. You'd push all the right buttons. This team would never have lost that game or a handful of others.

You can't coach, of course. But if you could...

The Drive Home

It's a silent drive. Your coach replays every important moment of that game in his head. Of course, the one moment he sees most often is the final pitch.

The look on his son's face as the final run scored. The tears that welled up in his son's eyes as he walked back to the dugout — alone — as teammates dropped to the ground. Tears, too, welled up in your coach's eyes.

He couldn't help but feel responsible. Maybe he could have made a substitution earlier that would have padded the lead. Maybe he should have walked that batter. Maybe he should have had your son pitch.

He reassures his son, but he's mainly mumbling to himself. He apologizes for putting him in that position. For not doing more.

A Coach's Awareness of Preferential Treatment

I can tell you first hand that coaching your own son complicates things. I know my son more than yours. I talk to and prepare him before and after games and practices. Some advantages are inherently there.

But there are disadvantages, too. I'm more critical of my own sons. I fear high pressure situations for them.

I'm also keenly aware of and sensitive to the potential perception of preferential treatment. I've consciously benched or moved down my son to prove that no such treatment exists.

It's a tough balance. I feel that a coach's son can suffer as much as reap rewards for his relationship to the coach. I expect more from my son, so the disappointment when he doesn't fulfill his responsibilities is greater. And his reaction to his disappointed father/coach will always be different than to an unrelated coach.

I love coaching my sons. But it has its disadvantages, too.

However, I also know how powerless I feel when I'm not coaching. I understand why parents feel powerless when they aren't making the decisions. We always think we would have done something differently or better. We always think our child isn't being given a proper shake.

That is one of the reasons I coach. I love coaching. The experiences of coaching my sons and the bonds we share can't be replaced. But it also has to do with having some control over the situation.

I can't complain about the role my kid serves when I'm the coach.

I understand, though, that I also need to accept that I have no control when I choose not to coach. I appreciate the challenges that coach faces. I won't always be happy about the decisions

made. But it was my choice not to coach, so I don't make those decisions.

If you can do better, coach. If you can't be the head coach, contribute what you can as an assistant.

If you choose not to coach, accept the decisions that are made. Try to understand the complexities the coach faces of coaching his own son. Appreciate the commitment and sacrifices your coach makes.

And enjoy the game as a spectator.