

**BEFORE
IT'S
OVER**

Parents' guide to

Making the most of high school sports



x

**POSITIVE
COACHING
ALLIANCE**

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More celebrating. Less criticizing.
More composure. Less outbursts.
More support. Less blame.



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More this. Less that.



Before It's Over...

The NFHS and Positive Coaching Alliance (PCA) have teamed up to bring you the Parents'* Guide to Making the Most of High School Sports. This guide is designed to support you in centering the high school sports experience around appreciation, connection, and growth for your athlete.

High school sports careers fly by – someday you'll miss this season of life, and using this guide helps ensure you and your athlete look back on it with joy and pride. Every athlete's journey looks different: not everyone plays four full years, experiences senior night, or a championship season.

But every athlete deserves a positive experience full of opportunities to grow on and off the field. The moments that truly last a lifetime are the little ones – mastering a skill after months of effort, building lifelong friendships, learning from diverse perspectives and situations, or receiving unconditional support from a parent or caregiver after a tough loss.

Take a deep breath, pause, and savor the journey.

When we focus on the positives of high school sports, reduce unnecessary pressure, model composure, and center on our athlete's personal growth, we become their strongest foundation.

When we lose sight of the purpose of high school sports, well-intentioned support can accidentally become extra stress. Studies show that when parent or caregiver support feels like pressure or conditional approval, it leads directly to higher athlete anxiety, reduced motivation, and burnout. ^(1, 2)

This guide delivers practical, actionable strategies to support your athlete, align on goals, encourage productively, navigate meaningful sports conversations, and celebrate memorable moments. By putting these tools into practice, you can be the steady source of support your athlete needs to navigate the excitement, challenges, and life lessons of high school sports.

**We recognize the wide array of important roles you may fill in your athlete's lives. For simplicity's sake, throughout this guide we will be using the term 'parent' to refer to anyone with the caretaking role for their athlete - i.e. guardians, caregivers, etc.*

- Dunn, C. R., Dorsch, T. E., King, M. Q., & Rothlisberger, K. J. (2016). The impact of family financial investment on perceived parent pressure and child enjoyment and commitment in organized youth sport. *Family Relations*, 65(2), 287–299. <https://doi.org/10.1111/fare.12193>
- Dorsch, T. E., Smith, A. L., & Dotterer, A. M. (2016). Individual, relationship, and context factors associated with parent support and pressure in organized youth sport. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 23, 132–141. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2015.12.003>

Before It's Over checklist

The high school sports years are surprisingly short. As parents and caregivers, we have the power to help make this experience a cherished memory rather than a stressful pressure cooker. This checklist helps you keep the focus on your athlete's growth, protect their experience, and truly savor every remaining moment. Before It's Over, I will...

- ✓ **Align on their goals, not mine:** Ask my athlete what they want out of this season and honor their personal motivation – whether it's high-level competition, fitness, or fun with friends.
 - ☐ **Try this:** Print out two copies of the Parent/Caregiver 100-Point Exercise included in this Guide and each fill one out.
- ✓ **Savor the joy of watching them play:** Express gratitude to my athlete for the opportunity to watch them compete, focusing on the joy of the game rather than the outcome.
 - ☐ **Try this:** Tell them: "I love watching you play and compete!"
- ✓ **Keep post-game conversations safe and supportive:** Give my athlete space after games, listening to understand their perspective, avoiding unasked-for critiques, and letting them lead the conversation when they are ready.
 - ☐ **Try this:** After a game, tell your athlete: "I'm proud of your effort today! Let me know if you want to talk about the game anytime."
- ✓ **Let them own the experience:** Empower my athlete to speak directly with their coach about playing time or other challenges when appropriate, while giving them space to build confidence and independence, only stepping in if they need support navigating concerns about fairness, bias, power dynamics, or safety.
 - ☐ **Try this:** Instead of stepping in to talk to the coach, role-play the conversation with your athlete, with you as the coach, so they can practice advocating for themselves, listening to criticisms, and creating a plan to move forward.
- ✓ **Praise growth and improvement:** Nurture my athlete's [growth mindset](#) by praising their effort and development, not results. Even in losses, point to where you've seen them improve.
 - ☐ **Try this:** Replace "Great goal!" with "I love how you got into position for that shot - your hard work is paying off!"

Before It's Over checklist

- ✓ **Trust the coaches:** Leave tactics, lineups, and strategy to those whose job it is and support the coach in developing life skills for my athlete.
 - ☐ **Try this:** Next time you disagree with a coach's decision, take a deep breath, regulate your emotions, and consider whether your concern is about a coaching decision you can respectfully accept, or something that may require you to advocate for your athlete's safety, well-being, or inclusion.
- ✓ **Respond with control to challenging situations:** Model emotional control and respectful conduct on the sidelines to provide an example of how to handle challenging situations not only to the athletes, but other parents as well.
 - ☐ **Try this:** When you feel yourself getting worked up on the sidelines, take a deep breath, consider taking a brief walk, or count to 10 to help regulate your emotions.
- ✓ **Build the sideline community:** Welcome other parents and caregivers, celebrate every athlete's progress, and foster a positive, inclusive environment for the entire sports community.
 - ☐ **Try this:** Pass out a list of each athlete's first name and jersey number to the sidelines so everyone can cheer for individuals by name.
- ✓ **Check in throughout the season:** Provide a safe space for my athlete to express their thoughts and feelings about the season. Listen without judgment, validate their feelings, and focus on the experience rather than the team's results.
 - ☐ **Try this:** Engage in a low-pressure activity, such as going outside to play catch, and casually ask how they feel the season is going. Guide them to talk about their feelings, not results.
- ✓ **Focus on the whole person:** Consistently remind my athlete that their worth as a human being is never tied to their stats, playing time, or scoreboard. Celebrate your athlete's growth as a person as well as an athlete.
 - ☐ **Try this:** After a tough game: "Today's game was hard. I'm really proud that you kept your effort up despite the score!"

The Before It's Over toolkit will provide you with actionable tools to help you accomplish this checklist.

Athlete perspective: 100-point exercise

When our athletes participate in sports, it's easy to get caught up in the moment. We remember our own experiences as athletes and naturally want the absolute best for our kids. However, it's important to take a step back and remember: **this is their journey**. High school athletes often have motivations for playing that we overlook, don't understand, or that differ from our own, and that's completely okay. The greatest gift we can give them is supporting the experience they want to have.

The 100-point exercise is designed to help you and your athlete align on sports goals.

1. Fill out the exercise separately, allocating a total of 100 points across the categories based on what matters most to you.
2. Sit down together to compare your results.
3. Use your scores as a starting point for an open, low-pressure conversation about your shared hopes for the season.

Become a good athlete	Other specify:
Learn new skills	
Learn to play the sport	
Learn to overcome challenges	
Learn different perspectives	Other specify:
Compete to win	
Build self-confidence	
Learn to process defeat	
Develop life skills	Other specify:
Learn to support teammates	
Have fun	
Make friends	
Earn a college scholarship	

TOTAL:
100

What happens when we direct from the sidelines

One of the great joys of high school sports is cheering for our athletes. However, if we don't do it with intention, our cheering can become a detriment to our athletes' experiences. Most of us have been there – the game is close, the moment is intense, and we call out directions because we want to help. It comes from a place of love and

support for our athletes. But research on how athletes process information under pressure shows that it can cause overwhelm and confusion, anxiety and pressure, frustration or embarrassment, overreliance on outside input, or could even cause them to tune out all instruction.

What athletes wish adults knew

- ✓ "I just want you to watch me."
- ✓ "I know what to do – I just need space to try."
- ✓ "When you yell, I overthink things, and feel like I'm doing stuff wrong."
- ✓ "It's harder to play when I'm worried about disappointing you."

Instead of directions, athletes respond best to:

- ✓ **Presence:** Let them see you smiling, clapping, and displaying calm body language.
- ✓ **Effort Praise:** Focus your praise on their effort instead of the results. "I love how hard you're working" reinforces what they actually have control over.
- ✓ **No-Directions Cheering:** Eliminate verbs in your cheering so athletes hear your support and not your advice. "Terrific play!" or "Way to play defense!" are two great examples.
- ✓ **Emotion Regulation:** Help your athlete stay in a calm, confident zone by focusing on your own emotional regulation first. These [self-regulation strategies](#) can help you stay calm and in control even in the toughest moments, giving your athlete an example of how to react when challenged.
- ✓ **Post-Game Curiosity:** After a game, allow your athlete time to process. When they're ready, don't harp on their mistakes, but guide them in processing their performance with a curious prompt like: "What felt good out there today?"



The "silent 5" challenge

Try spending the first five minutes of the competition simply observing in silence. Notice your athlete's effort, their problem-solving, and how they fit into the flow of the game without any sideline distractions. See how their energy changes when they have the space to play without interference.

More this. Less that.



Tips for communicating with your athlete

In the fleeting moments of a high school sports career, it can be tempting to lead conversations with your athlete with advice, problem-solving, or critiques in hopes of helping them take advantage of a time-limited opportunity. However, sports conversations are most effective and memorable when athletes take the lead. Use these practical communication tips to build trust, reduce pressure, and help your athlete navigate high school sports with confidence.

✓ Check Their Readiness to Talk

Don't assume your athlete wants to analyze a game right away, especially after a tough loss or poor performance. Give them the space to process and let them approach you when they're ready.

Instead of: "We need to talk about how you played out there."

Try this: "Let me know when you're ready, I'd love to hear how you felt about the game."

✓ Lead with Empathy

High school is demanding, and sports performances happen within the context of an athlete's entire day. Listen to understand their perspective, validate their feelings, and support them through challenges in the ways they need.

Instead of: "You need to try harder."

Try this: "It looked like a tough outing today. How are you feeling about it?"

✓ Reduce Unnecessary Pressure

High school sports inevitably present high-stakes moments. Help your athlete handle stress by introducing grounding techniques like breathing exercises or pre-game routines, while keeping your own support unconditional and pressure-free.

Instead of: "When you get in, show them what you can do; your team is counting on you."

Try this: "Have fun, give it your best, and know that I'm proud of you."

✓ Focus on Effort Over Outcomes

Shift conversations towards the effort they put in as opposed to praising results. Emphasize their hard work and progress toward goals rather than statistics or scoreboard results.

Instead of: "Your serve scored so many points today!"

Try this: "Your serve was so consistent today - all that extra practice is really showing!"

✓ Collaborate on Solutions

When issues arise, resist the urge to fix them yourself. Partner with your athlete to brainstorm solutions, empowering them to problem-solve and self-advocate while staying ready to step in if safety, fairness, or bias becomes a concern.

Instead of: "I told you this would happen. You should have talked to your coach about this weeks ago."

Try this: "That sounds like a tough situation. How do you want to approach your coach about it?"

More this. Less that.



End of season reflection

After the whirlwind of a high school sports season – full of high-stakes moments and inevitable stress – taking a step back to pause and reflect is a great way to fully appreciate the experience. Reflecting on your proudest moments and identifying areas where you can grow sets you up to be an even stronger source of support and confidence for your athlete, while helping you savor every moment of next season. Use this end-of-season reflection to celebrate your growth, the journey, and your athlete's accomplishments!

- ✓ **Rate yourself on each of the statements below using a 1-5 scale.**
(1 = Never, 2 = Seldom, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Often, 5 = Always).

- ___ **Support Through Mistakes:** I offered my athlete empathy and encouragement when they made mistakes, rather than jumping in with advice or correction.
- ___ **Active Listening:** I asked open-ended questions and listened to understand my athlete's perspective, rather than telling them how they should feel or play.
- ___ **Focused Praise:** I focused my praise on effort, growth, and resilience rather than stats, playing time, or wins and losses.
- ___ **Sideline Composure:** When faced with challenges on the sidelines, I modeled emotional control and composure.
- ___ **Post-Game Conversations:** I let my athlete take the lead on sports conversations after games, respecting their need for space or silence to process.
- ___ **Focusing on My Athlete:** I stayed present and focused on supporting my athlete during competitions, rather than reacting to officials, opposing parents, or coaching decisions.
- ___ **Partnering with Coaches:** I supported the team and coaching staff, only stepping in if a serious issue involving safety, bias, power dynamic, or fairness occurred.
- ___ **Parent/Caregiver Self-Care:** I managed my own stress and expectations so I did not add pressure to my athlete before or during competition.
- ___ **Unconditional Support:** I made sure my athlete knew - win or lose - that I love watching them play and value them for who they are, not just how they perform.

Long-form Reflection

What is one moment I was especially proud of my athlete this season?

What do I want to keep in mind for next season?

Bonus Step: Consider sharing your answers with your athlete. Highlighting the moments that made you proud – and sharing what you hope to enjoy together next season – is a meaningful way to end the season on a high note and reinforce that you love watching them play.

More this. Less that.



A message to your athlete

Before It's Over, make sure your athlete knows just how much you love watching them play. Writing a message – whether a handwritten note, text message, or email – gives them a lasting souvenir of their sports experience and your unconditional support. Use these prompts and starter phrases to craft your end-of-season message:

- ✓ **Highlight your pride in who they are**
Try starting with: "Beyond any scoreboard result or stat, I was so proud of the teammate, leader, and, most importantly, person you were this season..."
- ✓ **Share a favorite memory (focusing on effort, not results)**
Try starting with: "My favorite moment of the season wasn't a win, but seeing your hard work pay off when..."
- ✓ **Acknowledge a challenge they overcame**
Try starting with: "I saw how hard you worked through [injury/ tough loss/ learning a new role], and I love how you..."
- ✓ **Recognize a life skill they developed**
Try starting with: "Watching you grow as an athlete was incredible, but seeing you build real-life skills like [resilience/ leadership/ accountability/self-regulation/ etc.] when you [insert situation] meant even more. "
- ✓ **Express gratitude and unconditional love**
Try starting with: "Thank you for letting me share in your journey this season – I love watching you play."
- ✓ **Look ahead to their next chapter**
Try starting with: "As you look ahead to [next season/graduation/ your next step], I can't wait to see..."

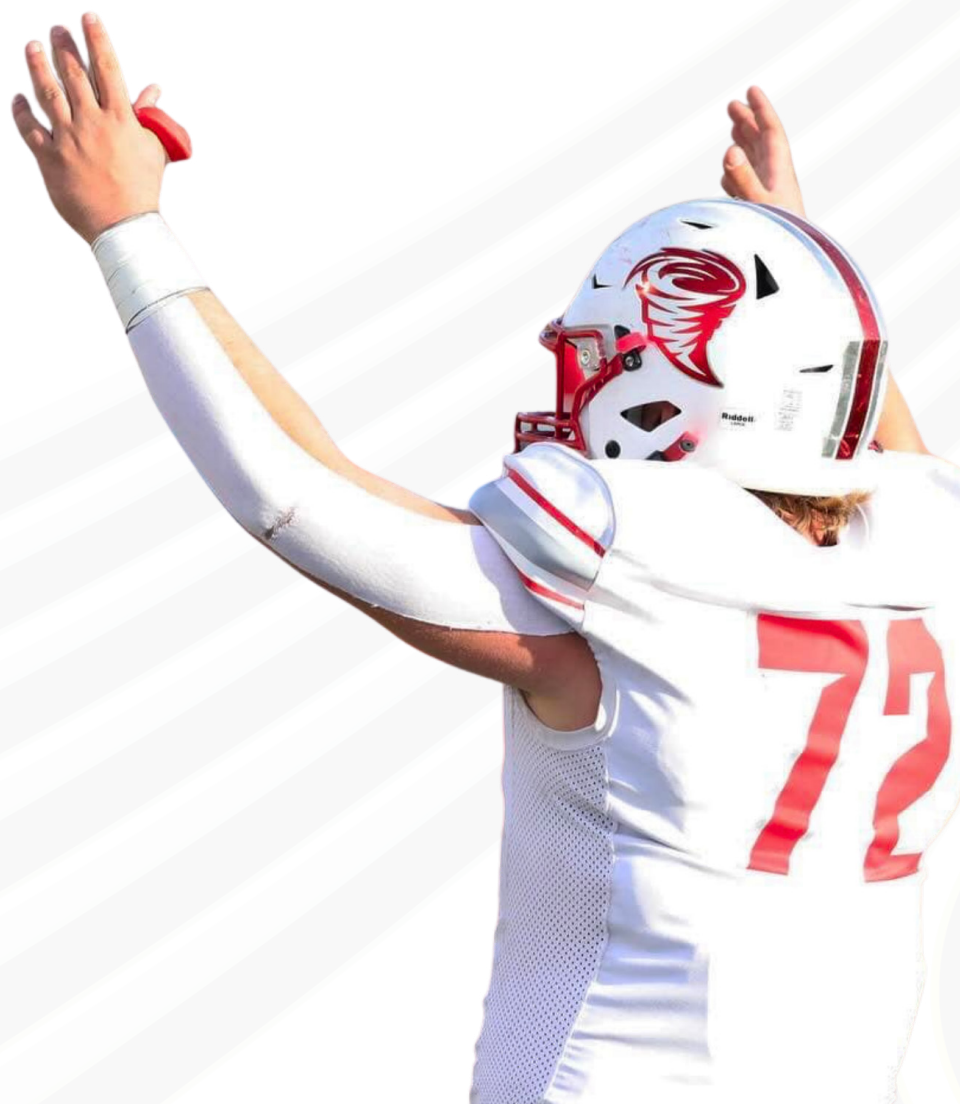
BEFORE IT'S OVER

THE GAME PLAN IS SIMPLE.
MORE THIS. LESS THAT.



Join the movement!

Scan the QR code to download
the complete toolkit.



x

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