



# PARENTING FOR SUCCESS

## Winter Sport Parent Information



Trey Seymour takes on a collegiate field (Tania Coffey photo)

### When do the competitions really count?

One of the challenges for parents and kids alike is knowing when do results really matter? Until a young skier or rider is through puberty and their growth spurt, many factors outside of their control may play a big part in their results. At the younger ages, an early or late birthdate may mean a significant difference in training volume and even in life experience and maturity. Early maturers may have size or strength advantages that outweigh skill advantages in late maturers. Sport psychologists suggest that it is not until high school that mental skills training should be a primary focus. So while there may be some high pressure competitions and championship events prior to high school, the results from these events generally don't have much correlation with future performance. At middle school and younger ages, inconsistent performance is normal. This is important to keep in mind at the "big" event.

We see young athletes making national teams or elite level competitions that garner a lot of attention. This can skew our perspective. At the SSWSC, we continue to focus on a broad base of technical skills at the younger ages because that is the time when they are moldable and can adapt their motor skills more easily. Later, when they're ready to make big gains with a competition-specific focus, we layer in the mental skills, tactical strategies and sport-specific training where results become more important. We believe, and research backs us up, that this approach will give the best chance for long-term success.

## COMPETING WHEN STAKES ARE HIGH

There is a point in the season where results become more important. Selections to championship events or select teams are on the line. With all the work our kids have put in preparation, it should be very important to us as parents to understand and be aware of how our actions can impact our children on competition day, and to know what we can do to give our kids the best chance to perform at their peak when it matters most.

First, it helps to understand a paradoxical relationship: for our children to get their best possible results, **avoid talking about results**. In training, the coaches teach the kids to "train like they race" so they can "race like they train". They practice course inspection, warm-up routines, visualization techniques and mental preparation strategies with simple cues that help them perform their best. These things can be rehearsed every day and done every event, because they are in the athlete's full control. They are intended to give the athlete confidence. However, it is easy for our kids to worry and focus on what will happen if they don't meet their goals when the stakes are high. This can put them in a fear-of-failure motivational state, and if we emphasize the importance of a result, fear of failure is more likely to kick in. When athletes compete with a fear-of-failure mentality, they tend to be tense, more conservative than normal, more negative in their thinking, and more prone to simple mistakes. Kids tend to focus more on results at important competitions, but they can't ski or ride to a specific result. They can only attend to their own performance. It takes years of experience and practice for most athletes to learn to block out distractions and negative thoughts, and focus on the task at hand. Parents can help by keeping the environment and their actions positive and normal, and by making sure that fear of losing our love and support is not one of the pressures our kids need to worry about if their results aren't up to par.

At qualifier events, I see parents studying the selection criteria and trying to figure out the results needed to qualify. This is OK, but it is trouble when it becomes the primary focus. I hear parents say things like "ski safe and try to finish in the top 20" or "just be sure not to crash and you'll make the team", thinking these messages will help their children strategize for their run. Consider how these are results-oriented messages that we have discussed are detrimental. Remember to leave the coaching to the coaches, especially at the big events. Understand how these messages introduce confusion, as our kids surely have not trained to finish in a certain position. Know that the coaches have tactical cues they'll use with our kids to help them execute something they've worked on in training to achieve the result.

Many parents have a great deal of anxiety themselves at big events. It's natural, we wish so badly for our children to reach their goals. Our children are very good about reading body language. They won't hear what we say if our body language says something different. Be very intentional about staying positive and upbeat, show the type of energy you'd want to see in your kids. Some parents find this very difficult. A great way to help deal with your anxiety at an event is to volunteer. Positions like gatekeeping, distance marking, timing, course marshalling or chopping can give you a great view of the competition while keeping you distracted. You also send a good message to your athlete about volunteerism.

Sometimes a big part of a parent's anxiety stems from their own self-worth being affected by their child's results. It's an easy trap to fall into, but left

## Perspective

Several years ago a parent made this post on Facebook. I can't imagine a better message:

*"So proud of my son. Yesterday was the U18 National Championships. It wasn't the day my son hoped for. After winning the first run he faltered on the second ... Thinking about yesterday, I said to myself, "if he had won, I would be plastering podium pictures. Am I even one iota less proud of him than if he had won the champs? Of course not. So then why am I not posting that?" Here it is. I am so proud of you for pursuing the journey you love. I always wish the best for you, of course. Nevertheless, I am equally proud of you whatever the result. You handled the result with dignity and represented yourself as a true sportsman and gentleman. There will be many more days to celebrate. Well done, All my love, Dad"*

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unchecked it leads to an unhealthy sport parent-child relationship. John Kessel at USA Volleyball shares some great perspective on this. He observes, "Your kid's success or lack of success in sports does not indicate what kind of parent you are... But having an athlete that is coachable, respectful, a great teammate, mentally tough, resilient and who tries their best is a direct reflection of your parenting." Think about it, the first part is the coaches' job, the second part is our job as parents. Even at the big event, these are the things we should focus on first and foremost. (See the left hand column.)

Be careful not to provide your child with an out. We can do this by acknowledging a weakness. For example, avoid statements like "this course isn't well suited to you" or "I know you're very tired" or "these other athletes have more training than you". These become built-in excuses if our kids don't do well. Without realizing it, we use excuses sometimes to help cushion the blow our kids feel (or that we feel) when they didn't get the outcome they'd hoped for, but excuses limit their ability to learn from the experience to do better the next time.

At the end of the day, understand that the big event can leave a long-lasting impression on your child. The experience doesn't end when they come through the finish line. The after-event experience is sometimes where we make our biggest mistake as parents. Any post-event celebration that was planned, be it a stop for ice cream or a special dinner should take place whether or not your child had a great result or not, so long as they gave it their best effort and represented themselves admirably. The car ride home is not the time to break down a performance, wait until your child is ready to talk about it, perhaps the next day.