



Reflections of a River Rat:

Riding the bench is not a life sentence

My cousin's daughter, Mary Lynn, was fretting for her 15-year-old sophomore. Connor had been promoted to the varsity basketball team after a rash of injuries to upperclassmen, but when they returned, his playing time diminished. Connor was bummed out about court time, went through a position switch, and craved the chance to stay on the floor and find some rhythm with his jumpshot.

Connor's plight resembles thousands of players across high school sports. The basketball court is restricted to five players a side, but usually seven or eight are riding the pines, waiting for their chance. It's the same in football – 11 may play at one time, about 30-plus watch. The school stage is similar – Who will get the prominent roles? Student elections – Effective leaders or popularity contests?



Coaches emphasize the need to stay engaged and positive if you are relegated to the bench.

The fallout always drifts into the laps of parents, whose options become swooping in as a “helicopter” parent or letting their young adults grow through adversity.



Bill Merna, working on skills with a young player, coached OFA varsity boys basketball for 37 seasons.

Retired OFA basketball coach Bill Merna saw a variety of situations during 37 seasons coaching the Blue Devils.

“The difficult challenge for a coach is between playing to win and doing what’s best for all your players,” Merna said. “If you don’t play to win, you can lose your locker room easily.”

That means you play the best student athletes and substitute when the situation warrants, but you

can’t play everybody. It’s the burden of coaching that comes complete with the emotions of players and their parents.

Merna recalled the season a player did not rank among his top seven but wanted more playing time. His mother was an OFA teacher, and she said he felt embarrassed that he wasn’t playing more.

“He wasn’t quite good enough,” Merna recalled. He engaged the mother in a few frank discussions, but ultimately the player decided to leave the team.

Through the years, he watched a cycle among high school athletes across sports. “The kids get upset over playing time, it gets bottled up inside them, and then explodes at the end.”

The pressure has grown today with the advent of social media. Gossip and ridicule that was once left at school now circulates 24/7 on the Internet. High

school students, still learning to be judicious and thoughtful, become instant publishers. Teenage athletes feel pressure; parents deal with the fallout.

Coaches today deal with a much testier landscape. Parents and fans always have critiqued coaching styles and decisions, or complained about the referees, but the chatter was restricted to a bar or a diner. Today, those gripes get aired anonymously in sports chat rooms. Or parents bypass the coach and administration and complain to the school board, reasoning that they pay taxes so their child should play. Whatever happened to a meritocracy?

People have been complaining about coaches and playing time since I graduated from Morristown in 1975. Players relive games or carry petty grudges throughout their lives. Recall Uncle Rico from “Napoleon Dynamite?”

“How much you wanna make a bet I can throw a football over them mountains?... Yeah... Coach woulda put me in fourth quarter, we would've been state champions. No doubt. No doubt in my mind.”

The Internet isn't all bad. Self-help advice abounds for players who want more court time:

- Talk to your coach;
- Keep working on skills;
- Stay engaged and emotionally ready to play;
- Keep your gripes quiet;
- Earn more time with practice effort.

Merna recalled a positive story when a player was upset with court time, but his father refused to intercede. He made the player approach the coach.

“He was a good enough player, but we talked, he asked what he needed to work on, and he did. He became a sixth starter,” Merna said. “That’s kind of rare.”

His memory needed only slight jogging to recall two outstanding reserves who made a difference on his teams. The first occurred in the 1970s with Bill Plimpton’s son, Mark.

“He was just all about the team and he didn’t get to play much,” Merna recalled. Plimpton scrimmaged intensely in practice and maintained a pristine attitude.

The other occurred in the ‘90s when Adam Lesperance, only 5-foot-4 but with a big heart, filled the same role.

“If he got in the game, he was happy,” Merna said. “If he didn’t, he was happy for his teammates.”

As a parent, I saw my daughter Claire go through the same issue. She was a capable basketball player, but figured as the eighth player on her team. She played forward at 5-foot-8 and 125 pounds, a Gandhi in sneakers. When she broke a bone in her foot in spring track, she booted around all summer before getting the go-ahead to run in mid-August before senior season. When she asked her basketball coach if she could play two meaningful minutes in the first half, he told her she “would only play if they were 20 ahead or 20 behind.”

She was crushed, but decided to switch to winter track. She had asserted herself, then made her decision. It was a powerful learning experience. Her story ended happily. At Alfred State, her cross country team won the NJCAA Division III national championship and she met her future husband.

The Connor story probably will have a happy ending too. The family had moved from a small academy in Connecticut to a school district roughly three times larger in Massachusetts. The competition was fiercer; the skill level greater.

As Connor’s JV coach pointed out to his mother, he is playing more than some of the juniors and seniors. He remains a dead-eye shooter, even if the coach’s son is dominating time at the point-guard position. He will have two more seasons remaining, enough time to grow, mature and add muscle weight.

Connor’s goal remains to play college basketball. And his mother isn’t swooping in to rescue him, but watching him struggle is excruciating. She wants him to manage the adversity.

“I feel he has to grow – as a player and as a person. It’s not always going to come easy.”

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Monmouth reserves use their bench celebrations to inspire teammates and fans, including this Sistine Chapel spoof.

