Player-parent-coach relationships growing more tenuous

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High school sports used to produce nothing but feel-good stories.

But lately, it has offered more stories that make us feel sick and wonder where we've gone wrong.

The latest one that had me wincing was news that Liberty's Dana Wieller, the school's all-time leading scorer in girls basketball, was dismissed from the team after walking off the court during a game because of a disagreement with coach John Tone.

I don't know Wieller, but I have been told that our recent "Take 5" subject is a nice kid and a very talented player.

But what she did, even if done in the heat of the moment, can't be condoned.

So, instead of enjoying a glorious end to one of the best careers a Liberty player has ever had, it ends in a mess like this.

I am not going to chastise Wieller because my guess is that she's hurting enough. This is one of those situations where everybody loses -- Wieller, Tone, Liberty and certainly all of the Hurricanes team members -- because, obviously, their chances of winning league and district titles have been greatly reduced without one of the area's best players. Even Lehigh Valley basketball loses, too, because the sport is being deprived of one of its best.

This incident is just the latest bit of ugliness from what I call the Bermuda Triangle of high school athletics -- the fraying relationship between coaches, players and parents.

No school, no sport, no coach is immune. Even coaches who have won state titles, 500 games and been inducted into halls of fame are getting their share of grief.

The line I've been using -- show me a coach with no problems and I'll show you a team of orphans -- rings truer than ever.

Every case is different, and no matter what Judge Anthony Rapp says, we can't have coaches go into the stands after parents, especially when the coach in the Salisbury girls fiasco, Ken Shankweiler, admitted in an e-mail to team members that he lost the passion for coaching.

But for the most part, these problems begin with unreasonable expectations of parents.
It starts with many parents coaching their own kids as they grow up in youth leagues and on travel teams. The entire industry of youth sports has become big business with parents shelling out hundreds or thousands of dollars to have their kids go to the very best camps and clinics and play in AAU-styled events. Kids no longer play solely on their own community teams in the offseason; they're traveling up and down the East Coast and beyond.

Forget fun-in-the-summer, family vacations. Many parents use their vacation time to watch their children play in these mega events, and it's not just basketball -- it's softball, field hockey, volleyball, you name it.

And with that big financial and time commitment comes an emotional one as well.

Parents are emotionally invested in their child's athletic career.

Forget about having fun. This is about exposure for a Division I college scholarship, which doesn't exist except for an elite few.

Parents are coaching their own kids on these tournament teams. That's why when one of these successful teams sends me info, I can also predict that the coaches' names will match the names of the top players.

When these same athletes get to high school, the parents reluctantly lose control. They're turning their kids over to neutral, unbiased parties, and to paraphrase Jack Nicholson's line in "A Few Good Men," many of them can't handle the truth. They can't accept that their kids can't play as much or play different positions than when the parents were in charge.

Parents have a sense of entitlement. They've put so much into their kids' careers that they expect a return on their investment, and when it doesn't come, they turn up the heat and go after the coach. Often, their twisted logic makes it seem like the kids are doing the school a favor, and if they're not treated well, they'll just move along to the next school like a free agent.

It's about their kid and what the team should be doing for him or her, not the other way around. And sadly, this selfish attitude even extends to the classroom. More and more, if a kid doesn't get good grades, it's the teacher's fault, not the child's fault.

I've seen some of the nicest, calmest, most intelligent people I know turn into absolute imbeciles when it comes to their kids. All perspective is lost.

Even when their team attains great heights, they're not happy unless their kid is getting the glory.

That's what happened last winter when Allen won the district girls basketball title and yet coach Tom Gallagher had a parent in his face during the gold medal presentation because Gallagher benched the parent's kid during the game. The player herself staged a tantrum and didn't want her gold medal.

These are not isolated incidents here or there, but a growing epidemic.

And no one wants to listen to reason.

When an organization called the Lehigh Valley Coalition on Sports Ethics brought in top-notch speakers and held forums on the parent-coach subject, attendance was poor.
"The other guy has a problem, not me," is the thinking most parents have.

So it goes, and sadly this "it's all about me" era of high school sports is only going to get worse.

As if altercations in the stands, tantrums during awards ceremonies and kids walking off during games aren't bad enough, just wait until tempers lead to somebody really getting hurt.

Then we'll all be losing more than just a game.

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