



## The Two Biggest Reasons for Troubled Athletes

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I spoke to a football coach and a basketball coach recently who both relayed similar stories from their last season. Both had to dismiss four players from their teams because they couldn't play as teammates. The athletes didn't have a talent problem; they had a problem with discipline and perspective. The coaches both admitted they just didn't have the time to get those players up to speed—so they let them go.

I think there's a deeper root problem for this predicament. During their childhood and adolescent years, kids often experience something traumatic. They encounter one extreme or the other: either abandonment or abundance. Some experience both.

### **Abandonment or Abundance**

**Young athletes who experience abandonment** are often thrust into responsible roles too soon. Perhaps because of an alcoholic father, an absent mother or a self-absorbed caretaker, these kids never fully form. They're exposed to emotionally traumatic situations and typically don't respond well. (Today, 62 percent of kids are being raised without their biological father.)

Obviously, some do fine, as they're forced to become "adults" very early. More common is another scenario, however, when kids are abandoned: They simply stop growing emotionally. Their maturation is stunted. I know several former athletes in their forties who are far from being healthy and well adjusted. It's as though when children are abandoned, their emotions and spirit stop maturing. They shut down. They may have adult bodies, but emotionally, they're still early teenagers. They're girls and boys who can't seem to become women and men.

**The other extreme is abundance.** It's a great word—we all love abundance. But when abundance is furnished and young people never learn to manage their resources (money, possessions, relationships or time) because they have so many, their growth can be stunted as well. Their ability to grow up simply atrophies. (Current research suggests that as many as 30-40% of twelve to eighteen year olds from affluent homes are experiencing troubling psychological symptoms.)

Certainly, all parents wish to provide for their children abundantly, but a never ending supply of anything reduces the human ability to interpret, manage, save, give and spend wisely. Frankly, we become spoiled. Kyle is a student athlete in this situation. His parents are fearful of losing him. They're afraid he won't like or accept them. So Kyle is now in

power. He's completely self-absorbed, and he's come to expect his parents to do everything. Kyle has feigned a suicide attempt and is rude to his teammates. His parents are ashamed.

Kyle was not abandoned. Quite the opposite. He wasn't expected to fend for himself at seventeen or eighteen, when he probably should have been. More important, there was no plan for giving him responsibility in increasing amounts as he grew up.

**This abandonment/abundance problem is worse when a student athlete goes from abandonment to abundance due to their talent.**

For example, a boy may grow up without a dad and lack the direction he desperately needs to become a man. Then, in middle school or high school, he discovers all kinds of attention because he can run well with a football. Suddenly, he goes from abandonment to abundance. He may not know how to handle all the attention and may soon become a "prima donna."

**We Must Perform a Balancing Act**

What young athletes need is a coach, teacher or leader who makes appropriate demands and sets appropriate standards for them in a responsive environment of belief and concern. In short, they need us to display a balance of two qualities—they need us to be both responsive and demanding:

- 1. Responsive:** to display acceptance, support and patience; to be attentive to them.
- 2. Demanding:** to establish high standards, directing them to target those standards.

When we confront a troubled young player, we must ask ourselves daily: What does this kid need in this moment—a responsive or demanding coach? Players who've had little support in the past may need you to offer that belief and support. Others who've had too much—need someone to finally demand something of them.

Here's to discerning when you need to be responsive or demanding.