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A Champion's Mother Speaks: Joys and Trials of Parenting a Sports Child

Devika Nadig

Having both relished and survived twelve years as a school head and fifteen as the mother of a champion in a difficult, solitary game like chess, it will not be an exaggeration to say I have experienced a lot, both of the competitive sport, and the world it encompasses.

I do not know what came first. My daughter Krutika's frequent absence from her school and the accompanying angst of spending endless hours waiting for leave letters at her principal's office - or my own positive stand as a school head, on allowing children to pursue a sport of their interest as a serious engagement. Perhaps one was born out of the other.

However, I staked out and steadfastly held on to my belief that pursuing sports in school despite all odds, including the pressure of coming up to speed with missed academic curriculum, is something worth doing. Therefore, the school I lead became a magnet for those aspiring to become sport stars. We quickly gained a reputation for being "considerate" towards such aspirants, cooperating with their hectic training and tournament schedules, and accommodating their tests and assessments whenever they were back in school. Ironically, while I did this for several students of my school, my own daughter had a hard time in her conventional school. There was no question of moving Krutika to my school as I wanted to spare her the differential treatment the principal's daughter was sure to receive.

In my attempts to support talent, I learnt that students, when given the freedom to pursue their passion, whether it was for sports or music or the other performing arts, usually displayed immense accountability to the teachers on their return to school, and were keen on catching up with all they had missed, which included bonding with friends, if any. There

was a quickening of the pace at which they absorbed everything around them, trying harder, living every moment in school in a highly energized state. That was a surprise. One would have imagined they'd be exhausted, and would have rapidly succumbed to lethargy. Whether this renewed energy was their own, or driven by a desire to please teachers and parents, and impress peers, was not clear.

The parents of these young sports stars of the school fluctuated dangerously from one emotion and aspiration to another. Some days, when their offspring would win laurels and return, they swore they would do anything to keep the game going, and laboured the point of how "just academics" was not a worthy goal. And on the return from a bad phase, it would be an endless lament about the unpredictability of the game, and whether the school could help in getting the child to stay focused on academics. This sort of a vacillation was less prevalent amongst the seasoned parents. As well as those, whose children were older, and clearer about what they wanted to pursue. Even if success was elusive.

I remember the mother of a tennis champ narrating how the boy would plead with her to "take up" his studies while he was bathing, at breakfast, on the school bus, and so on, to save time. I found an echo in such tales because my own daughter would have completed all her homework on the bus, so that she could be ready for chess practice on getting home. Such is the force of passion, if driven by a goal.

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As compared to this, several students who were not pursuing a serious sport / hobby would be whiling away a lot of their time by hanging out with friends. Perhaps the rest of their time was spent in tuition

classes. Or, maybe TV viewing. But I know for a fact that they were largely bored. And, therefore, disinterested. My takeaway from this was to help students set attainable goals for themselves. We encouraged all of them, to pick up at least one hobby or sport, beyond the scope of academics, which could give them end-



less joy throughout their lives. And the most desired situation for anyone would be if your sport or hobby could itself metamorphose into your profession!

Then there were the champions. They moved around the school campus like little Kings and Queens. Backs upright, heads held high, a smile playing on their lips. Oozing confidence and efficacy. This rubbed off on many other things they did. In school, I did not come across a single arrogant champion. They might exist in tournament halls. But here they displayed a strange humility. I believe it was because we saw them in many other dimensions and their game was just a small part of their person. Champions were also trendsetters for the aspiring players. The spirit got a boost and new dreams were born. And we supported all young dreams.

There is wisdom in playing a sport just for the sake of the sport as well.

For championships can be elusive. Whether they become stars or not, encouraging children to pursue a sport during their growing years has several advantages. Sports, like music, breaks all barriers erected by nationalities or culture. If you can choose a game which gives you the opportunity to travel, it gets you up close with others like you all across the world,

from different histories and cultures, and broadens your world view like no amount of reading does. This is a hands-on experience. Borders dissolve. There are friends in far-flung lands. The world becomes smaller, and closer.

In my role as a mother of an active player, I lead a life full of agony and ecstasy. But even in the most agonizing moments of tournament losses, there was eternal hope and aspiration of blissfully better results, through sheer effort, and renewed determination. In fact, it became an addiction of sorts. An addiction worth nurturing. I sometimes wonder if my craving for the game and tournaments was more intense than that of the chess champion at home!

The primary reason for schools not being terribly excited about students opting for sports as a serious pursuit can be found in their collective, unyielding thirst for academic marks and grades. This they feel, is the only way to build credibility for themselves. Clearly, this is fed by what society values, and schools, sharing a bizarre camaraderie with the parents on this count, begin to measure their worth in terms of how many rank holders and toppers they churn out every year - when they should be chasing the all-important school goal of good learning for every child, and supporting every child to discover her inner potential.

The bane of it all is of course the constant search for funding to support the game. Speaking of chess, the only things that come cheap are the board and pieces. There are phenomenal charges for coaching, if you want to engage a decent coach, and the tournament costs burn a hole as well. My guess is that this is a tough call for most parents, however supporting they may be.

A lot of my time and effort was spent on approaching sponsors, presenting our case, and then chasing through what seemed like the wildest goose on the run. After repeated attempts, some Good Samaritan would oblige, and that moved us one step closer to the dream goal.

However, we were fortunate in winning top championships, which brought funding from the government

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and the Sports Authority of India. The irony is that even if you deserve these on merit, you are never assured of being granted them, unless you sit on a dharna of sorts in the corridors of power in the capital.

As a result of this exposure, I was able to help some players in my school, whatever the sport, in reaching the right offices and tables in their search for funding. The battle was then theirs. The enormity of the en-

terprise therefore assumes the single minded commitment of at least one adult in the players' life.

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Heartening though it is to see prominent TV channels taking up campaigns like "Marks for Sports", one needs to reflect on why we have come to such a pathetic pass.

The struggle to excel in sports, in spite of academics, continues. Often, alone.

***Devika Nadig** is one of the founders of Shikshangan Education Initiatives - located at Pune. She has been a part of the education space - primary, secondary and tertiary - both private and Government managed. A former school principal and a parent of Kruttika Nadig (a chess champion), she has worked with school heads, teachers, college faculty, young adults, and has carried out several evaluations of social initiatives. She can be contacted at devika@shikshangan.org*

