

# **When to Push**

*A Parent's Guide to Supporting Your Young Athlete Without Burning Them Out*

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter 2: The Science of Motivation

Chapter 3: Signs You're Pushing Too Hard

Chapter 4: 10 Golden Rules for Parents

Chapter 5: Understanding Burnout

Chapter 6: Words That Build Resilience

Chapter 7: When to Step In and When to Step Back

Chapter 8: Building for the Long-Term

Chapter 9: The Family Check-In

Chapter 10: Positive Sideline Support

Chapter 11: Final Words

## **Behind this Guide**

*Like many parents of ambitious young athletes, I wanted to get it right - to support my son without pushing him over the edge.*

*As both a coach and a father, I saw firsthand how easy it is to blur the line between encouragement and pressure. When my son started showing early signs of burnout, I knew I had to shift gears. Not by pulling back entirely, but by understanding what actually helps young athletes grow, thrive, and succeed over the long term.*

*Consequently, I did the work. I read, researched, listened, reflected - and this guide is the result.*

*It's built for parents like me. Parents who care deeply about their kids' success, but also know that real achievement doesn't come from fear or force. It comes from confidence, consistency, and connection.*

*This isn't a rulebook. It's a reset. A way to show up with more intention, and help our kids perform at their best - without losing who they are along the way.*

## Chapter One: Introduction

### **The Dilemma Every Parent Faces**

As a parent, you want the best for your child. You see their potential, their flashes of brilliance, and you want them to work hard and go far. But where's the line between healthy encouragement and unhealthy pressure? It's blurry and easy to cross.

### **Why It Matters**

Studies show that excessive pressure from parents is one of the leading causes of youth burnout and dropout in sport. According to Harwood et al. (*Harwood et al., 2010*), kids who perceive high levels of parental pressure are more likely to experience anxiety, lowered self-esteem, and reduced enjoyment.

### **Our Goal**

This guide will help you walk that fine line. It's not about holding back your ambition for your child, it's about guiding that ambition in a way that uplifts them, not overwhelms them.

*"Children become the messages they hear the most. I see kids heading to the starting line wearing a metaphorical 50 lb weight vest because of the things their parents say." - Dr. Jim Taylor, Sports Psychologist*

## Chapter Two: The Science of Motivation

### **Intrinsic vs. Extrinsic Motivation**

Dr. Edward Deci and Dr. Richard Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) emphasizes that motivation driven by internal desires like joy, challenge, and curiosity - leads to better performance and wellbeing than motivation based on external rewards.

- **Intrinsic:** Love of the game, joy in improvement
- **Extrinsic:** Rewards, approval, trophies, scholarships

According to Self-Determination Theory, three psychological needs are essential for intrinsic motivation:

- **Autonomy:** Freedom from external control or pressure
- **Competence:** Feeling capable and effective
- **Relatedness:** Feeling connected and supported by others (Riley, 2016)

*The Cognitive Evaluation Theory (a sub-theory of SDT) further suggests that excessive external rewards can undermine intrinsic motivation by reducing a person's sense of autonomy. This is known as the "over-justification effect." (Riley, 2016)*

### **Why This Matters for Parents**

Pushing too hard can tip the balance toward extrinsic motivation. Kids start playing to please you or avoid your disappointment, instead of for their own growth.

### **Your Role**

Support your child's autonomy by giving them the freedom to take ownership of their goals and actions. Let them feel that they are in control of their journey, not simply following your blueprint. Research shows that when young athletes feel empowered to make decisions, their motivation, engagement, and resilience increase significantly (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Ask questions like:

- "What did you enjoy about training today?"
- "What's one thing you want to get better at next week?"
- "How would you like to approach this goal?"
- "What support would help you most right now?"

Encouraging autonomy helps your child learn responsibility for their progress and allows them to feel capable of influencing their own success.

*Research by Dr. Angela Duckworth (Grit, 2016) notes that when kids feel in control of their goals, they build grit; when they feel pressured or coerced, they tend to pull back*

Final Words

If you've ever worried, "Am I doing too much?" — you're already doing something right. Awareness is the first step toward growth.

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"If your child still loves the game, you're doing a good job."

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End of Guide