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Ways to remove parents' rose-colored glasses

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My stepdaughter was in fifth grade, up on stage with all the other girls in her elementary school. Dani's a pretty girl, no question, but my wife, a fifth grade teacher at a different school, leaned over to me and whispered, "She's the prettiest girl on the stage."

Now Maggi should know about cute fifth-graders; she teaches them all the time, and though Dani has never had trouble finding a boyfriend, she wasn't the prettiest girl on that stage. In fact, she might not have been in the top 10 -- but to a mother's eye, she stood out from everyone else.

Shift the scene to basketball, but put parents in the stands who know very little about the game. What are the odds they will accurately be able to judge their daughter's relative ability?

I think we all know the answer to that one, but before we go any further, there's one aspect of this that everyone -- parents, kids and coaches -- needs to understand: Parents should overvalue their kids. After all, if the parents don't think their daughter is the greatest thing since the microwave, who will? Parents need to believe in their children, and children need their parents to believe in them.

But there's also this thing called reality, and it has a nasty way of intruding on people's dreams. The fifth-grade girl who's a pretty good basketball player in her rec league may dazzle her parents, but is she really a scholarship athlete? The eighth-grader who dominates CYO may have summer-team coaches asking her to play, but does that mean college coaches will follow suit?

The first question is basic: Does the girl love the game enough to play in college? It's easy to answer yes, but if you ask any college player about the time, energy and level of commitment needed at that level, you'll get an earful. It's a job, plain and simple, and continued employment for the boss depends on how the employees (the team) perform. Is there pressure? You bet. Are there demands? More than you know. Will it be harder than anyone expects? Absolutely.

Assuming that the desire is there, the next question is even harder: How good is she?

This is the point where parents need to step back, take a deep breath and then admit to themselves that they are hopelessly biased. They simply cannot, try as they might, make a balanced assessment of their daughter's basketball ability -- and decisions need to be made.

Asking local coaches is a good idea, but remember that very few really know what it takes to play in college. If the coach has worked with four or five eventual Division I players in high school, they will probably be able to give solid advice -- but then again, that coach may have other reasons to tell a family what they want to hear. The ideal resource is an experienced coach who will never have the girl on his team, or better yet, two or three of them. After all, evaluating talent is a notoriously chancy endeavor, as a look at the NFL draft -- the result of tens of millions of dollars of research -- will reveal. If scouts and coaches in that league can be so wrong after so much time and effort, it's pretty clear that this is more art than science.

Still, the more honest opinions parents can gather the better. And parents must remember one thing: don't argue, just listen. If a coach says, "She's too small to be a power forward," don't say "But she guards bigger girls all the time." The parents might be right and might be wrong, but what they want to do is hear what other people think, not defend their daughter's ability.

And there are other ways to determine just how good a young player is, but again, there's an important point to remember: Coaches want to win, and they're going to play the best players. There are no conspiracies involved here; if a girl isn't playing, it's because the coach doesn't think she can help the team win. And if a girl has college-level talent, she's going to help the team win.

That means, simply, that a college-level player will be on the high school varsity team as a freshman -- and will be in the rotation. If she doesn't start as a freshman, she's not a BCS player (unless there's an older girl who will play in college ahead of her). A future SEC player, in fact, should be all-league in her first year in high school.

If none of this is happening, parents need to realize their daughter isn't going to get that scholarship offer from Stanford -- or even Oregon State.

And if a girl can't force her way into the starting lineup by sophomore year, she's probably not going to be getting any money to play in college. If she's not an MVP candidate by her junior year, the same message is being delivered. (And whining about people not liking her, or her coach not pushing her enough, is just noise -- a truly college-bound player simply can't be ignored.)

The hard truth is that it's a huge, huge jump from high school and summer ball to college. In college, the girl who was pretty good against her own age on the AAU circuit will suddenly be going against young women of 22 or 23 who have played a 100 college games and spent years in the weight room. They are smart, strong and tough -- and are always eager to teach a newbie some lessons about the reality of college basketball.

What's so unfortunate about the way the system works is parents and players must make critical decisions about their future just as they're entering high school. Should a young player go with that elite summer team that's traveling all over the country, or should she stay closer to home, work on her skills and play for a team that will put the ball in her hands all the time? Should she try to get into the top local high school and risk not playing as much as she would at another school?

In short, what can she reasonably expect from her basketball career? Is she scholarship-bound or will her high school days be the pinnacle?

These are very, very hard questions to answer when a girl is 12 or 13, yet some attempt must be made, and parents, unfortunately, are not the people who should be filling in the blanks. To them, their daughter is not only the best player on the floor, she's the prettiest girl on the stage.

And that's just how it should be.