

Dear Coach:

See Us, See Them — A Letter from Two Athlete-Parents

Laneshia Conner
University of Kentucky

Brandon Doggett

Melissa Doggett

We have both worn jerseys. We have felt the lights, the pressure, the expectations. We have run the drills, heard the yelling, taken the hits—on the field and off. We were athletes once. Now, we are something else. We are athlete-parents—and we are not sitting quietly. And we are writing this not to blame or complain—but to ask you, as directly as we can: see our kids. Really see them. Not just their effort or their stats or their “attitude.” See who they are. See what they carry. And understand what sport could mean to them—if you get it right.

We came up in different places. One of us moved from base to base—military towns, new schools, new teams. Sports were the way in, every time. Another grew up in rural North Carolina, where the road outside her house was not even paved until she was grown. Sports were not an option for girls—not real ones. Cheerleading was the only thing available, so she did it. And she worked at it. Hard. But she still had to defend it—prove it even counted as a sport.

We both knew early: sport could be a lifeline. But it could also cut deep.

I, Brandon, played football and baseball at a high level. Then came senior year. A bad ankle break. A whole season—gone. I kept walking, even though I was in pain. No one asked. I did not tell. That is how it was back then. And the mental part? Even worse. The anger, the bitterness, the depression? No one called it anything. No one made space for it. You just kept playing—or got left behind.

I, Melissa, did not have the same opportunities at a young age as my children did. I raced boys and girls on the playground, in PE, and on field day that is where most of my competition was during the school days. However, as a kid I was told that I could not do certain things because I was a girl. I vowed to never hold my daughter to those same standards.

Now we have got three kids in the game. They are fast. Smart. Focused. And they are watching everything. They see how coaches talk to them. Who gets attention. Who gets silence. They see who is assumed to be a leader, and who has to earn that label ten times over. They know what it feels like to be excellent and still not be fully welcomed. We know it too.

Let us say this plainly: *a coach can make or break a kid*. You have seen it. We have lived it. Some coaches lift kids up. Others look right through them. And that difference? It sticks.

Melanie was doing really well; Bryson was decent also. They [the coaches] just were not paying them any attention. They were not commended for their efforts. We changed clubs because Sam saw Melanie running at an indoor meet and saw how amazing she was. She saw that she needed a little work and she would be “legit” someday. Now they both work hard on speed and technique in track.

At another club, our son showed up, ran drills, did his job—but never stood out. Until he changed teams. That coach saw him. Looked him in the eye. Asked about school. Gave him reps. Treated him like he mattered. Now he will not stop practicing.

But that is what happens when kids feel seen, they blossom.

But too often, the opposite happens. And not just on the scoreboard. Morgan got praised for making it to third base and was all smiles because of it. Really created love for the game. The exact opposite happened to Melanie, who knows very little about softball, but because she is so athletic, they expected her to be great at something she was unfamiliar with. So that killed the love some.

Those are the moments that change kids. Sometimes forever.

We remember it ourselves. One of us played on an all-Black Little League team that dominated the league. Shut teams out. Not one of us was chosen for All-Stars. Not one.

The message was loud. And it does not fade.

So now, we do what we can.

We give rides to the kids who do not have one. We bring extra food. We open our home. We remind the team that the kid who shows up late, or without cleats, might be your best player. We have seen clubs that save scholarships for their “top” teams—and ignore the kids who just need a shot and a ride.

We do not coddle our kids. We push them. But we show up. When they fail—we are there. When they win—we are there. When they break—we do not walk away.

We do not expect coaches to be everything. But if you hold the clipboard, if you blow the whistle, then you are holding something sacred. And we are asking you: do not waste it. Because here is what really breaks kids. It is not just getting benched. It is not even the yelling. It is the silence. The kind of pain no one talks about—because no one asks.

I, Brandon, still remember that senior year. The pain, yes. But the depression too. The spiral. The sense of being alone in it. Back then, no one called it “mental health.” You were just expected to deal with it. Quietly. We have done it too — played through injury, smiled through exhaustion, pushed through fear.

And we see the same thing in kids now. The ones who limp but say they are fine. The ones who blink back tears. The ones who make jokes to hide what is under the surface.

We have seen kids break down and get brushed off. Just called dramatic. Just told to toughen up. But we know what that kind of pressure does. We have lived it. Kids today are still scared to speak up. Still convinced that if they admit they are not okay, they will lose minutes. Or lose their spot. Or be labeled “soft.” And sometimes they are right. But it should not be that way.

So, if you want to coach right, coach the whole child. Not just the speed or the strength. See who they are. What they carry. Ask questions. Listen for real answers. And when in doubt? Stay. Just stay. That is what they will remember.

Do Better. Start Now.

This letter is not just about our family. It is about every kid with invisible burdens you do not see.

The one who is not eating before practice.

The one who is always late.

The one who talks back.

The one who smiles too hard.

You cannot coach what you do not understand.

You cannot develop what you do not see.

So, here is what we need from you—what every athlete needs from you:


- See the whole child.
- Ask better questions.
- Do not measure a family by how fast they pay.
- Do not measure a kid by one bad day.
- Let talent surprise you.
- And when in doubt, show up.

That is what we are doing. We are showing up. We are holding the line between what sport did for us—and what it could do for them.

With hope,

Brandon & Melissa

Author ORCID ID

Laneshia Conner  0000-0001-5500-893X