

How did we get to this point? As I sit here, this is all I can think about. Typing this out, only a day away from hearing the news that we've lost another college athlete and our thoughts immediately turn to suicide. Lauren Bennett was just coming off of an incredible weekend, earning Player of the Week honors in the Colonial Athletic Conference. We don't even know the cause of death yet, but our natural thoughts are that she took her own life. Why she would do that, and why didn't we see it?

I can see it. The pressures placed on student athletes can be too much to bear. And it doesn't start in college, it ends there. By the time we send our children off the college, so many of them are already messed up. It's just easier to blame the college because they are the last step in the process.

As parents, we need to understand that our children's successes and failures are not ours. Kids need to fail and learn from those failures. I've been to various tournaments and have seen more parents than I care to count have the same type of emotion that I had. If their kid has a bad day, they are gonna hear about it from mom and dad after the game. As a coach, I've witnessed this. I've dealt with a lot of fragile egos. Softball is a game of failure. And with current technologies, we can track that failure even more. Stats are being kept at all levels, to be used against players. Games are live streamed so even more people can watch and critique and be judgmental. I've had talks with parents about how tough they are with their kids and a common response is associated with "tough love". OK, but where is the love? And why are you the one being tough on them? As I have coached girls at the 16 and 18U level, I've seen a lot of the damages done by other coaches. Over the last couple of years, I've had girls that love the game, but just want to have one more year of fun. Girls that have been cut from teams they were a part of for years, only to have a coach go in a "new direction". Most have just wanted to feel wanted, to feel like they were good enough in someone's eyes.

I am not pointing fingers because I have been guilty of this as well. Jennifer started gymnastics at 4 years old. By the time she was 7, she was competing in local competitions, and failing. She was consistently at the bottom of the standings the first year. And it frustrated me to no end. Why couldn't she do better? Why didn't she care? Why didn't she try harder? I was spending good money on gymnastics and I was not seeing any return on my investment. There were many, many tearful rides on the way home because she felt like she failed because of what I said. But I justified it to myself. I was a coach, and she needed to be pushed. The problem was that I wasn't the coach, I was the dad. I was the problem.

Do you see where I am going with this? Am I the only one who has felt that way? At age 7, she was already feeling like she was a failure to her dad. To this day, it still sickens me to say that. No child should have that stress placed on them at age 7. How many other people are doing the same thing to their kid?

But she worked, and worked hard to get better. By the time she was 10, she was a state champion. It was a fantastic moment for everyone. I still have that picture of her

in my arms all in smiles. But I think the win meant more to me than it did to her at the time. I don't believe that she fully realized what she accomplished. All she knew was that her dad was proud of her. That was all that mattered. Unfortunately, the scars are there. Some have healed but others probably will always be there. We have had many discussions, debates, and arguments over time about the line between being a coach and a dad. I needed to know when to be a dad and when to be a coach as well. I needed her to hear that as a dad, I just enjoyed watching her compete. And I needed to learn to enjoy watching her compete instead of constantly trying to push her to be better.

So once again, how did we get to this point? I don't believe there is a magic answer, but I feel like everything is happening too soon. I am seeing 8U tournaments becoming more and more popular. 8U tournaments??? Are you kidding me? Why are we doing this? Personally, I feel like it's all about the money. Tournaments are good money makers. Clubs can make more money by adding an 8U team to their group. Who benefits the most by doing this? The clubs. They are taking advantage of the situation and taking advantage of parents. "Don't you want your kid to be the best?" "Aren't you worried about your child being left behind by starting too late?" These lies are getting spread to get you to "invest" in your child. Your child's growth and development should not be placed in the hands of someone you are paying.

Don't do it. Parents, spend time with your kid. Play catch, go for a walk, take a trip. Whatever it takes. Do it before those opportunities are taken from you.