



THE LONG GAME ACADEMY

PARENT DEVELOPMENT FOR COMPETITIVE SPORTS FAMILIES

THE CAR RIDE HOME

*The conversations your athlete will remember
long after the game ends.*

Welcome In

Fifteen years coaching. Three kids of my own — Gracie, Holly, and Coh. More car rides home than I could ever count.

Somewhere in all of that, I noticed something most of us miss. The most important fifteen minutes of your athlete's week doesn't happen on the field. It happens after — in the seat next to you, while the adrenaline is still leaving their body and the whole evening is riding on whatever you say first.

I learned that the hard way, in a truck, on a cold spring night, from my own son. You'll read that story next. It's the one that started everything I now teach.

This guide is what I wish someone had handed me back then. It isn't a system, and it won't cover every situation your family will face. It's the truth about what's happening in that car, and a handful of things that genuinely help — for baseball, hockey, soccer, dance, or whatever uniform your kid wears home.

There's more waiting inside the Long Game Parent Academy, for whenever you're ready to go further. But this guide, on its own, can change your very next drive home.

Buckle up.

A FEW STOPS AHEAD

02 Why The Car Ride Home Matters — the truck story that started it all.

03 The First Five Minutes — what to do before a word is said.

11 The Questions That Build Confidence — and the ones to leave out.

Why The Car Ride Home Matters

Coh was twelve. Cold spring night, the kind where you can see your breath in the dugout. He struck out three times.

We got in the truck. Heater blasting. Neither of us said a word for a while.

Then I said it. *"You've got to want it more than that."*

He looked out the window. Then, quietly: *"I am trying, Dad."*

Three words. They broke something open in me. He hadn't been dogging it — he'd had a bad night, the kind every athlete has. And in the fifteen minutes he needed me most, I'd handed him a verdict instead of a seat belt.

That truck is where everything I now teach began.

Ask a room full of grown former athletes what they remember from their playing days, and almost nobody starts listing plays. They remember how it felt. They remember whether the car was safe to sit in after a hard night. Not the score. Not the stats. The weather inside that car.

PAUSE & REFLECT

What's the last car ride home you wish you could redo?

"You don't get many championship seasons. You get a few thousand ordinary car rides. This guide is about those."

The First Five Minutes

Your athlete just competed in front of people they care about. Their nervous system is still coming down off it — win or lose. That's not attitude. That's biology, and biology has a timeline.

● 0 – 5 MINUTES · RED ZONE

Say nothing.

The nervous system is still in fight-or-flight. No feedback lands as information here, not even the accurate, well-meaning kind. It lands as threat. Put music on. Look ahead. Let it be quiet.

● 5 – 10 MINUTES · YELLOW ZONE

Follow their lead.

Things are starting to settle. If they want to talk, let them start it. Ask about them, not the game — *"How are you feeling?"* goes further than *"What happened out there?"*

● 10 – 15 MINUTES · GREEN ZONE

Real conversation is possible.

If it's going to happen, this is when. The real coaching still doesn't belong here — save it for tomorrow at dinner. The same feedback, given too early, is criticism. Given at the right time, it's coaching.

Silence is biology. Not abandonment.

After A Great Game

A win feels like an easy car ride. It isn't always — how you celebrate teaches your athlete as much as how you comfort. Praise the result, and you've taught them the result is what you value. Praise the effort underneath it, and you've taught them something that survives a losing season.

"I love watching you compete."

Takes the result out of it. Your enjoyment of them was never about the scoreboard.

"You worked really hard for that."

Names the part they actually controlled.

"I'm proud of how you handled that."

Finds the character in it, not just the outcome.

SAY

- *What did that feel like out there?*
- *What are you proud of tonight?*
- *What do you want for dinner?*

AVOID

- *You're finally playing like you should.*
- *See what happens when you try?*
- *Now let's keep that up every game.*

Those last three sound like praise. They're pressure with a bow on it — they quietly attach your approval to the next performance. Keep the celebration about your kid, not the standard they now have to keep hitting.

After A Tough Game

By the time your athlete reaches the car, they've replayed every mistake. They are not waiting for your breakdown of what went wrong. They're hoping you're not about to confirm what they already fear is true — that they disappointed you.

The hardest part is resisting the urge to coach. You saw exactly what went wrong. That instinct isn't the problem. The timing is.

SAY

- *That looked hard. How are you feeling?*
- *I'm proud of how you kept going.*
- *What do you want for dinner?*

AVOID

- *What were you thinking on that play?*
- *Why weren't you more aggressive?*
- *You've got to want it more than that.*

A STORY — THE OTTAWA SLUMP

My son went cold for weeks one fall. My first instinct was to fix it — more reps, more video, more analysis. None of it worked. What actually helped was stepping back and trusting that a slump is a season doing what seasons sometimes do, not an emergency. It ended the way most slumps end — gradually, and not because of anything I engineered.

*A quiet car isn't a failed car.
Sometimes it's the safest one you'll have all week.*

When Your Athlete Starts Criticizing Themselves

"I suck." "I let everyone down." "I'm terrible." "I'll never make this team."

The instinct is to argue with it — to list the reasons it isn't true. Most of the time, that backfires. Your athlete isn't asking for a debate. They're testing whether it's safe to feel this bad out loud, in front of you.

SAY

- *That sounds like a hard thing to carry.*
- *One bad game isn't the whole story.*
- *I'm still on your team, always.*

AVOID

- *Don't say that, you're great.*
- *You're being dramatic.*
- *Well, you did miss a lot of shots.*

WHY IT MATTERS

Self-talk after a hard game is where a young athlete's story about themselves gets written. Correct it too fast, and you teach them to hide it next time. Sit with it instead, and you teach them the story isn't finished — and that you'll be there for the next chapter either way.

When They Hardly Played

This is one of the hardest drives you'll have. No play to talk about — just a kid who watched most of the game from the bench, or the end of it, wondering if anyone noticed.

The instinct is to solve it — playing time, the coach's decisions, what needs to change. Resist that tonight. What they need first is someone who noticed how hard it was.

"That had to be frustrating. I thought you handled it well."

Names the feeling before anything else gets discussed.

"I know that was hard to sit through."

Validates the difficulty without minimizing it.

"You're still part of this team, minutes or not."

Ties belonging to who they are, not to playing time.

"What do you want for dinner?"

Sometimes the kindest move is simply forward.

If a playing-time conversation needs to happen with a coach, let it happen later, once things are calm and it's a planning conversation instead of a wound being pressed on.

Tonight your job is small.

Let them know the bench didn't change how you see them.

When They Make A Big Mistake

The error that costs the game. What you're protecting isn't their record — it's the line between what they did and who they are. A mistake is something that happened. It is not a character reading.

A STORY — SCOTT THE COACH

Old school. Direct. Not much for softening things — yet the players loved him. I asked my son why. He thought about it. "*He treats us like we can handle things,*" he said. "*Like we're not going to break.*" My own instinct to soften things had quietly told him the opposite. High standards and genuine safety were never opposites — the best coaches I've known hold both at once.

And if the mistake brings tears, say nothing. Sit with them. A hand on the shoulder does more than any sentence you could reach for.

*A mistake is a moment.
Not a mirror.*

When They Don't Want To Talk

A Story — The Combine

A seventeen-year-old I know, Nick, had a skill assessment that didn't go the way he'd hoped. Afterward, he went completely quiet — not crying, just quiet, in the way that means something is being worked through underneath.

His father sat next to him and said nothing. No advice. Nothing to fix. Just present, letting the silence be enough. That was exactly the right call.

“Not every conversation has to happen right now.”

HOW LONG IS TOO LONG?

A quiet drive is normal. A quiet week is worth noticing.

If it stretches — if the quiet starts showing up away from the car too, at dinner, with friends, in the things they used to enjoy — that's no longer about one hard game. It's worth a gentle check-in, not an interrogation. Something as simple as *"You've seemed quiet lately. I'm here whenever you want to talk"* does more than it looks like it does.

Silence from your athlete is not a locked door. Respecting the quiet is its own form of conversation — one that says, without a word, *I'm still here, whenever you're ready.*

MILE 10

**THE FEEDBACK CAN
WAIT.**

**THE RELATIONSHIP
CAN'T.**

The Questions That Build Confidence

The right question rarely mentions the scoreboard. It points your athlete toward the parts of the night that were actually theirs.

"What felt good today?"

Notifies feeling, not outcome — where the love of playing actually lives.

"What did you learn out there?"

Turns the game into information, not a verdict.

"What are you proud of?"

Trains them to find their own pride, instead of waiting on yours.

"What's one thing you'd like to keep working on?"

Puts them in charge of their own development, not you.

"What was the most fun part of today?"

Keeps the fun in view — the reason they keep playing at all.

None of these ask for a number. They ask your athlete to notice their own experience.

*Try one of these tonight.
Just notice what comes back.*

The Questions To Avoid

These rarely come from a bad place. They come from caring, and from having watched the whole game. But timing changes everything a question means.

"Why did you strike out?"

Asks for an explanation before they've processed what happened.

"What happened?"

Feels like an investigation, not a conversation.

"Why didn't you catch that?"

There is no answer that doesn't feel like a confession.

"Were you nervous?"

Plants a label they may not have reached for on their own.

Every one puts your athlete on the stand before they've had a chance to just be a kid again. The same words, asked tomorrow at dinner, might be exactly right.

Notice which of these has slipped out before.

No judgment. Just notice.

Three Things Every Athlete Needs To Hear

"I love watching you compete."

Says your enjoyment of them
was never tied to the result.

"I'm proud of who you're becoming."

Names the person, not the
performance — the part that
outlasts every season.

"I'm always on your team."

Tells them they'll never have to
face a hard night alone.

Said once, these are nice things to hear. Said consistently, across years and seasons and ordinary Tuesdays, they become something your athlete carries — a floor under them that no bad game can crack.

*Say them even when nothing went wrong.
Especially then.*

One Conversation Can Last A Lifetime

My son was nine. Right field, house league, nothing on the line. Between pitches, he started doing the floss — just a kid dancing around out there, completely unburdened, in cleats two sizes too big.

I laughed out loud. Then I felt something I didn't expect. Gratitude. In that moment he wasn't an athlete with a development plan. He was a nine-year-old having the time of his life. That is the thing worth protecting, before anything else.

*The goal was never to raise a great athlete.
It's to raise a healthy, confident young person.*

One day, the game ends. A father I know once told me about that exact drive — his son quiet, looking out the window, until he finally said, "*That was a good run.*" Three words. Somehow, it was everything.

**The game will end.
The relationship won't.**

That is the long game.

The Glovebox Card

A one-page version of this whole guide. Screenshot it. Keep it in the car.

THE FIRST 5 MINUTES

Say nothing unless they speak first. Silence is biology, not abandonment.

FIVE PHRASES THAT WORK

- "I love watching you compete."
- "What do you want for dinner?"
- "That looked hard. How are you feeling?"
- "You worked really hard today."
- "I'm proud of how you handled that."

LEAVE OUT OF THE CAR

- "What happened out there?"
- "Why weren't you more aggressive?"
- "You've got to want it more."
- "Were you nervous?"

WHEN THEY CRY

Say nothing. Sit with them. A hand on the shoulder. No fixing.

*The feedback can wait.
The relationship can't.*

The Journey Continues

This guide is only the beginning. If you've made it this far, you already know the car ride home is a good place to start — but it's one moment in a much longer season of raising an athlete.

Inside the Long Game Parent Academy, you'll also learn how to navigate:

Confidence

Pressure

Coaches

Playing Time

Burnout

Motivation

Communication

Failure

Identity

Mental Performance

Difficult Conversations

The Long Game

*Because no single conversation shapes an athlete.
Years of conversations do.
That is the Long Game.*

EXPLORE THE PARENT ACADEMY

longgameacademy.com