

WHAT EVERY PARENT SHOULD KNOW

By Juliet Newcomer

Reprinted with permission from the April 2005 issue of SKATING magazine

Finding a coach can be an overwhelming and intimidating experience, especially for parents who are new to the sport. These feelings are certainly understandable. A coach is, after all, a person who will spend hours training and interacting with your child - a person who will help shape their attitude about skating and competition in general for years to come.

Truth be told, hiring a coach can be a daunting task for even the most experienced of skating parents. The key to overcoming the fear associated with hiring the "right" coach for your child, however, is to approach it like you would any other major purchase or decision you would make, with research and patience.

DETERMINE YOUR NEEDS AND WANTS

Before you can find a great coach for your child, you have to determine what makes your child tick. While a coach might have performed miracles with other skaters, your child might not respond to his or her coaching style. Think about the types of people who work well with your child and the ways in which he or she is best motivated. Does the child have any favorite teachers? And if so, why is that teacher a favorite? Are there certain adult family members with whom the child interacts particularly well? Does he or she feel more comfortable with older or younger adults, males or females?

Not all athletes respond the same to all types of coaches. Some need disciplinarians, while others might respond better to coaches who are very reserved. Determining your child's unique predispositions will go a long way toward choosing a coach who is a good fit. Once you have identified what type of coach would work best with your child, spend time watching a variety of coaches work with other students. Are the coaches positive and encouraging? Are they professional? Are they punctual and do they come to their lessons prepared?

COMPARE OPTIONS

Before long you will have developed a list of coaches who you feel are worth closer inspection. At this point you should begin setting up meetings. A meeting gives you a chance to ask important questions and provides an opportunity to find out how you, and your child, interact on a personal level with the prospective coach. Come prepared with some issues you would like to discuss. A few questions we recommend asking include:

- What is your coaching philosophy?
- How long have you been coaching? (Keep in mind, however, just because a coach is new that doesn't mean you shouldn't hire them. Still, you should at least be familiar with the coach's experience.)
- What are your greatest coaching accomplishments?
- What is your skating background?
- Do you specialize in coaching certain disciplines (singles, pairs, dance, synchronized skating)?
- What levels have you passed?

- Did you skate competitively?
- Are you a member of U.S. Figure Skating and the Professional Skaters Association (PSA)?
- Are you PSA rated or ranked?
- How do you stay current with the sport and the profession of coaching?
- What are your rates for lessons, competitions, cutting program music, etc.?
- How often do you bill for charges?
- When do you expect to be paid?
- What is your policy if we have to cancel a planned lesson?
- Are there any other policies that we should be aware of in advance?

REVIEW AND RESEARCH

Even if your child only skates a few days a week, your skater's coach will have a significant influence over his or her life. Therefore, it is important that you and your child are comfortable with the person you choose. Take as much time and talk to as many people as necessary until you are satisfied that you are making a good choice.

Subjects that are unfamiliar to you may arise during a meeting. The intricacies of the sport can be overwhelming, and it takes time to develop a complete grasp of every type of rating, competition, level, etc. If, during your meeting, unfamiliar subjects are raised, do some research after the meeting. For example, if you don't know the different figure skating levels or competitions, you can learn more on the "About Us" page at PSA rankings and ratings can be researched on the PSA website at If you want to verify a prospective coach's claims, you can contact the U.S. Figure Skating and PSA offices.

FOLLOW UP

OK, you have determined your child's needs, interviewed coaches and selected one you believe will take your child to the next level. You have verified all of their credentials and worked out a payment plan. But you're not finished. The point of all of this preliminary work was to build up your knowledge base so you can make the best decision possible, much like you might do if buying a car or some other big-ticket item. Of course, you wouldn't spend weeks researching an automobile purchase, buy the car, then leave it sitting in your garage, never to be driven.

In a similar vein, after you have selected a coach, you should observe some of the lessons (take the coach out for a test spin, as it were). It is important to make sure that the coach/skater relationship you have invested in is what you want it to be. If after observing a few sessions you have questions or concerns, set up a meeting with the coach. A respectful and open dialogue can prevent problems down the road. If you have a situation that you feel warrants attention, take it privately to the board of directors of the club or management of the rink and allow them to handle it appropriately. Never badmouth a coach to other parents or skaters. Most coaches are independent contractors and are dependent on their clients to earn a living.

Figure skating is a wonderful sport that can breed self-confidence, self-reliance, self-discipline, good health, lifelong friendships and a lot of fun. A skater's coach plays a large role in all of this, so take the time to find the coach who is right for your child.