

Some parents of high school athletes walk a tightrope when advocating for their kids

[Scott Venci](#), USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin Published 5:27 p.m. CT Jan. 9, 2018



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Jon Keener has learned a lot about being the parent of a high school athlete the past four years.

He's the father of Kaleb Keener, a multisport athlete at Green Bay Southwest who was named the Fox River Classic Conference receiver of the year in football as a senior this season. He also has excelled in basketball and track and field.

Jon Keener, like most parents, always has wanted the best for his son, including the opportunity to earn a college scholarship.

He's just not sure he always went about it the best way.

"Let the kid work out his own process," he said. "Don't shove them in it. You can encourage them. You can say they are pretty good. But let it be their process, because I have been guilty of pushing Kaleb too hard. ... Even pushy parents like me can't make the kid want to do it."

The balance between pushing and accepting a teenager's desire to play sports, as well as handling the emotions of situations out of their control can be difficult for some parents.

Before almost every football season, Jon and Kaleb Keener would get into the same argument. The old man wanted his kid to play, and the kid wasn't sure he wanted to.

It was a constant battle. Dad always won.

"I think up until going into my junior year, it was always more he wanted me to play, so I played," Kaleb Keener said. "I remember driving to Dick's in seventh grade to get my

mouth guard and looking at him and saying, 'Dad, I don't think I want to play this year.' He goes, 'You have got to play. You have always played.'

"It wasn't a question of do I want to, it was you have to. Before my junior season when I really started to enjoy it, I think it was more I just didn't want to disappoint him."

Handling parents

Coaches get emails from upset parents. They get phone calls. They receive unsolicited advice after losses and sometimes even wins. Other times, players start voicing complaints and it's obvious to the coach where the message came from.

Winning sometimes cures all, or at least makes it harder to complain. But even then there can be a lot of work trying to make sure everyone is getting a big enough piece of the pie to be content.

It's difficult at times to get coaches to talk openly about relationships with parents. They don't want to make their lives more difficult or cause a distraction for their team.

Still, it can be an issue. It certainly can be disruptive during a season.

"I think it has gotten worse over time because parents have become more vocal about it," said Otis Chambers, who retired in June after serving two decades as an athletic director at Bay Port and the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay. "I'm not so sure that the complaining and the fact that it goes on has gotten any worse, it's just that nowadays parents are more willing to voice their opinions, and social media and all the outlets they can voice their opinion, the amount of communication avenues make it more visible than it was in the past."

“Parents have always complained. Now, we hear about it more. That’s all.”

Each school and coach handles parents differently.

When Chambers got phone calls, he would ask the parent if they had first contacted the coach. He also didn’t want to ignore them, because it could have made the situation worse. Most of the time they just wanted somebody to listen. So he did.

“If you say, ‘Hey, listen, if you don’t talk to the coach I’m not listening to you,’ then you are only really exacerbating the situation,” Chambers said. “To a certain degree, you have to take a little onus. At some point, you have to listen to them a little bit.

“I think there are some incidents where you either tell them they are over the line, especially if it starts to be threatening to somebody. There is the other part where we say we aren’t going to change your opinion, here are your options.”

When Chambers describes threats, he isn’t talking about physical ones but rather a parent threatening the coach or AD about going to their bosses as a way to intimidate them.

Jon Keener never complained to or harassed coaches or athletic directors, a statement backed by Southwest football co-coach Patrick Wallace, who said he never had one conversation with him about playing time, the amount of targets his son was getting or the opportunities they were providing him.

Wallace said Keener always was very supportive of the program and the teams over the years and even provided heaters, meals and other things to make sure the program had what it needed to succeed.

Still, there were times when Keener couldn't help himself.

"I was very drastically different this year," Jon Keener said. "I kept my mouth shut. In fact, I videoed games just so that I had something to focus on to keep my mouth shut. I had a couple of games where I got a little excitable.

"It wasn't like that before. I was very vocal and running around like an idiot. I'm sure it embarrassed the kid. I've got no excuses. It was just me getting into the game. This year, I made an effort to keep my mouth shut, because you never know where the coaches are up in the stands, and if you're one of those dads like LaVar Ball, yikes. The coaches don't want some screaming idiot at one of their games."

Neither did Kaleb Keener.

It never was bad during football season because the venue was big enough that it's difficult to hear one excitable parent in the stands while running routes.

Basketball was different.

"We had to discuss that if I hear him, I am going to have to ask him not to come to the next game," said Kaleb Keener, who didn't play basketball this season in order to prepare for track and field. "It sounds really mean, but at a varsity level game to hear your dad scream at a referee or a coach, it does get very embarrassing. You do look up and go, 'That's my parent.' That did have to be discussed, and after it was, it never happened again."



Green Bay Southwest's Kaleb Keener (5) once told his father, Jon, he couldn't come to his basketball games if he couldn't stay quiet. (Photo: Adam Wesley/USA TODAY NETWORK-WI)

There were times during football this season when Jon Keener saw other teams pad their stats against lower-level competition and would watch as his son got taken out by halftime. He wanted to see him get the opportunity to catch a few more passes to make his numbers even better.

"I kind of had an ugly aura, and I'm not saying I'm proud of it, because I shouldn't be," Jon Keener said. "It's somewhat childish, but at the same time, this is it. This is your

senior year. Now you are where we are right now. Colleges are not calling you. I don't get it. I've been scratching my head over this."

Scholarship the prize

A free ride to college — or at least getting some of school paid for — sometimes can be a big factor in the coach-parent relationship.

Some parents spend thousands of dollars to send their kids to camps, get private lessons or do anything else to give them a better opportunity to play beyond high school.

Jon Keener estimates he has spent one year of college tuition during his son's athletic career, which is nowhere near the bill other parents have racked up. They hope to see their children succeed because they want the best for them, but they also have made an investment in their future and would like to see it pay off.

Kaleb Keener stood out at many of the combines and camps he attended before the 2017 season. He was clocked at 4.47 in the 40-yard dash and had a 43-inch vertical leap. His 40 time was the fastest of the 188 receivers at the Northwestern University Classic.

He put together a senior season in which he was a first-team all-conference pick on offense and a second-team pick on defense while helping lead his squad to a WIAA Division 2 semifinal playoff game.

The metrics and success are both there — not to mention good grades — so it's puzzling to Jon Keener that his son has been offered only by two Division II schools. He wishes he could say it doesn't bother him, but it does. He also doesn't think that makes him a bad parent.

Maybe that passion could be considered a good thing.

Wallace has been coaching varsity sports since 1995. While he sees more specializing and resources being put in to allow sons and daughters a chance to improve athletically and possibly earn a scholarship, like Chambers he hasn't seen that much of a shift from a parent standpoint during that time.

But there's something he has noticed.

"I also have seen a better commitment towards athletes wanting to come together in the school weight room than when I was playing in high school," Wallace said. "There are years where we are getting 80 percent or more of our program's athletes to show up during our summer lifting sessions, and that is a credit towards the buy-in of both the parents and athletes."

Jon Keener would do things differently, although it's difficult to argue with the results. His daughter, Kasey, was a cheerleader in the Big Ten Conference at the University of Minnesota and Kaleb will get the chance to play in college.

Both have turned out to be productive people, and despite all the early battles, Kaleb Keener is appreciative of what his father did for him.

"He instilled in me a work ethic that was not only for sports but for school," he said. "It was always school first, athletics second. He always pushed me in the classroom first and then he'd take me out to the gym and rebound for me or throw me the ball in the street.

"He was always my biggest coach, my biggest pusher. But he also was my biggest supporter when it came to succeeding. ... looking back it has been a ride, and there have

been some quarrels, but I loved every minute of it and I'm incredibly happy that my father was the way he is."