

Tom House, coach for Tom Brady, offers advice for sports parents

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Brace yourself. Tom House is not a traditional thinker.

He looks at failure as a positive, even embraces it. He trusts process over results. In fact, at the younger levels of sports, he thinks the outcome of games is irrelevant.

If you are a parent, you might not like what he says about youth sports. While he is known for his groundbreaking work with biomechanics in sports and the science of throwing a baseball and football, he is most passionate about coaching kids.

"It's not the parents' fault but you get these helicopter parents or these people that are so involved because they think that if they can get their kid to be on four travel teams, and if their kid wins trophies at every level, they're gonna play in the big leagues," House says. "Well, it just isn't that way. ...

"And I don't think it's because of bad intention. Even with good intentions, if you're too involved as a parent with what your kid is doing on the field, it's not gonna end up good for anybody."

A father of two girls and a boy, he was once a sports dad. House, who pitched in the major leagues for eight seasons, has only been thrown out of a baseball game twice: Once when was in the big leagues and once when he was watching his son, Bryan, play at La Jolla (California) High School.

"Dad, please, go somewhere else," Bryan told him. "You're embarrassing me."

So the man who has instructed Nolan Ryan, Tom Brady, Drew Brees and Dak Prescott went and stood behind the chain-link fence at the field.

Bryan came to his father his senior year and told him: "Dad, I love you but I don't love baseball. I'm gonna go on tour with Tony Hawk."



Tom House working with Tim Tebow in 2015. Gary A. Vasquez, USA TODAY Sports

"And I remember thinking, 'Who in the hell is Tony Hawk?' " House says. "I don't know if that was his choice subconsciously. He had the tool kit to (be) a big-league hitter or pitcher but his love – basically, his ignition – when it came to sports was surfing, snowboarding and skateboarding."

House, 76, now coaches all of his athletes with three primary goals: instruct, inform, and inspire to find that ignition.

"Ignition for me is when a kid realizes, 'This is what I really, really am passionate about; this is what I wanna do,'" he says.

He thinks outside the box after nearly six decades as a collegiate and professional athlete and coach. He has four degrees, including a doctorate in performance psychology, but also has learned from being a reformed sports parent. He knows firsthand how parents' actions, though delivered with love, can be destructive to children's playing careers at young ages.

Think you're a good sports parent? Here are 10 tips for young athletes and their parents House shared in an interview with USA TODAY Sports:

1. It's heartbreaking to watch your kids fail but it's good to let them fail

House's father, also named Tom, was a World War II veteran. His mother, Ruth, came from an Iowa farm. They didn't know too much about sports, which allowed House to develop his true passion on his own.

"Hey Dad, I threw a no-hitter," House remembers saying when he came home one day.

"That's great," his father replied. "What's a no-hitter? How'd you do it?"

To his parents, the "how" and the "why" were more important than the outcome.

"Outcomes don't define you," his mother told him. "What defines you is your persistence and your process."

He and his brother learned early on that failure was part of being an athlete.

So why do we try and avoid failure with our kids, and even criticize them for it?

When a 9- or 10-year-old has a bad swing or throws a bad pitch, House asks them to consider why and then to move on to the fix. If you dwell on the mistake, or if someone forces you to dwell on a mistake, you're asking your brain to fix something that's already happened, and thus impossible to fix.

2. Instead of dwelling on results, embrace the power of play

If you go to a big-league baseball game, watch the athletes. They have put in the time and the work and, in many cases, they make millions of dollars, but they're goofing around like they are 12.

It's a carefree love of sports we catch like a bug in childhood that House calls "the power of play."

"I'm 76 with Parkinson's, and I still love to go the ballpark and I can't play like I did in the past," House says, "but I still pal around with those kids just like I was 12 years old.

"If you're in sports for any length of time, you're always gonna be a terminal adolescent."

When parents and coaches care deeply about the outcome of games and put pressure on kids to succeed, they can disrupt this feeling and even cause the child to quit.

Kids can be so sensitive to a parent's presence. House once heard his mom, who was sitting in center field amid a large crowd at a major league game, clear her throat during a lull. It was her nervous habit.

House still induced a flyout to end the game.

"My parents weren't rah-rah, make a lot of noise, but I knew that they were there and I knew that they cared," he said.



Tom House coaches pitcher Shane Green. Courtesy of Tom House

3. The power of play prolongs careers

House has led the way in revolutionizing our thinking about the shelf life of a pro athlete. As pitching coach for the Texas Rangers in the 1980s and 1990s, he helped churn out pitchers who pitched into their 40s, including Ryan and Jamie Moyer, who lasted in the major leagues until he was 49. Brady and Brees excelled into their 40s in the NFL.

Yes, it takes profound dedication to be those guys, but House thinks the power of play correlates to their longevity and, perhaps more importantly for our purposes, it carries them on into their post-athletic life.

Brees lives down the street from House in San Diego. House sees the same enthusiasm in him with his kids as he saw when Brees coached up his receivers in preseason workouts.

"The makeup that he has as a father and a coach is the same as it was when he was a father and a player," House says.

4. We parent out of love, but coaching our kids may be doing them a disservice

"You've got a 16-year-old," House said during our interview. "Are you aware that a 16-year-old boy, subconsciously, his No. 1 job is to piss you off?"

We both paused to laugh.

"When you realize that," he continued, "that's when the value proposition of a third party, a coach that knows what he's doing, is a practical necessity. Because there's gonna be battle royale going on, whether it's overt or covert until your son is 19 or 20. And then, all of a sudden, overnight, he becomes your best friends."

When I learned firsthand how temperamental teenagers can be, I knew it was time to stop coaching my two sons, 13 and 16. I became more of their life coach, but I made sure I wasn't their head coach or the primary person who helped them with hitting or pitching.

Brees will throw batting practice to his kids but he'll farm them out for instruction, either to House or someone else.

House has found the best learning environment is one coach to four or six kids. The kids learn by hearing, seeing and feeling, and when watching each other, they learn from each other. From a personal standpoint, this method can be more cost-effective.

5. Being too involved in your kid's sports actually hurts his or her performance

Take the parent – or, more often the coach – that House calls “Mr. Hyper,” who loudly shouts instructions and corrections from the bleachers or sideline.

Sports are challenging enough. Athletes at times must let their thinking go and trust their process for physical acts.

When you get inside the consciousness of your son or daughter by yelling at them during games, you take away the necessary focus they need to be successful.

"If sports parenting was easy, every parent would spend all their efforts in helping with the process and let the outcome take care of itself," House says. "And then when the outcome presented itself, they could go back to the drawing board and adjust what was necessary."

If your intrusive behavior continues, your son or daughter will simply quit. Studies have found 7 in 10 kids stop playing their sport of choice before age 13, and the primary reason is they're not having fun anymore.

6. Hall of Famers are late bloomers

There are sports success stories of prodigies like Bryce Harper and Michelle Wie, but they are the exceptions. Elite athletes are late bloomers.

Trust the process.

"You can't expect a kid to be Nolan Ryan if he's 12 years old and he's grown four inches in the last year and his big toe can't talk to his brain," House says.

"Participation of a pre-adolescent should be just learning the game and learning the body, and in that first window of trainability, letting the nervous system understand what the movements are to be able to throw, swing, slide, whatever it might be. And kids develop at different ages."

Conversely, House says, "If you got all your tools figured out at age 16 and 17, that's probably as good as you're ever gonna be."

7. The best athletes play more than one sport

House likes to say: "We train to throw; we don't throw to train."

He stumbled upon this theory while working with pitchers and figured out that the ones who were healthy and successful could throw a perfect spiral with a football. Ones that couldn't throw a spiral were hurt or couldn't throw strikes.

House became a pioneer of motion analysis for pitchers. (He works for a company called Mustard that applies his data and breaks down your kid's pitching mechanics.) The deeper he and his researchers got into the data, they came to the conclusion that all rotational athletes are pretty much the same.

Playing multiple sports is good for your brain and promotes neuroplasticity, or, in simplified terms, the brain's capacity to develop and change.

House says, for example, if you've only learned one delivery as a pitcher and you specialized on pitching when you were 10, then got hurt when you were 17, your body only understands that one delivery.

"The more muscles and nerves you put together with the movements and the positions of a rotational athlete, the better you're gonna be with your aging process and/or if you ever experience an injury," he says.

The same idea can be applied to Ryan, who played basketball, and Brady and Brees, who played baseball.

8. Sleep matters, whatever your age is. In fact, the best sleep occurs before midnight.

Americans are notoriously sleep-deprived. Even our kids stay up late looking at screens, then go right to bed. When this happens, House says, your sleep will be interrupted for another 90 minutes – a full REM cycle – before your body settles down.

Here are a few more tidbits on sleep from House, whose team gets most of its sleep data from Stanford University:

- The first four hours of sleep is physical recovery. Your sleep cycles are 90 minutes, and if you can sleep 4½, 6, 7½ and 9 hours, and not wake up in the middle of one of those cycles, your sleep is much more efficient.
- Sleep in the dark. Ever notice how quickly you wake up sometimes when you nap? If light is touching your skin, there's messages sent by the skin where the light is touching to your brain that it's daylight.
- Sleep cool. The optimal temperature is around 64 to 68 degrees Fahrenheit.

9. Velocity matters, but learn to pitch, too

"You can teach a 6-year-old to throw a curveball," House says.

He is speaking within the context of his research, which he said proved that curves thrown properly are actually easier on your arm than a fastball.

We have an obsession with velocity. When House reached the big leagues in 1971, the average major league fastball was around 85 mph. Now it's in the mid-90s and there are several guys on each staff that touch 100.

But hitters have caught up. Ever seen that 6-foot-2, 12-year-old who blows everyone away? It won't last if he doesn't learn to change speed and pitch to spots.

House teaches three pitches to two locations for 10-year-olds and 30-year-olds. Eventually, if you can throw three pitches to four locations, House says, you can pitch forever.

10. Adjust your expectations

Hall of Famers pick things up really quick. House has found that while it might take a junior in high school who has gone through a growth spurt months to figure out a movement, Ryan would have the same movement figured out within four or five reps.

House knew early on that he wasn't Ryan or Tom Seaver. Instead, his mother always told him to be the best version of himself. Sports, after all, can be a holistic experience we carry with us through life.

"Everybody shows up the first day of Little League thinking their son is gonna be the next Nolan Ryan or whatever their favorite player is, and it's a nice dream to have, but the reality is very few, if any, of those Little Leaguers is ever gonna play past high school," House says. "Your job as a parent is to make the experience, in the long-term adaptive learning, as positive as it could possibly be."

As a boy, when he told his mom he had pitched a no-hitter, she said, "That's awesome. Did you get an 'A' in English?" And right before she died, Ruth House asked him when he was gonna get a real job.

House realized long ago that if you're in sports, and especially if you're playing sports, you're never really working.

Steve Borelli, aka Coach Steve, has been an editor and writer with USA TODAY since 1999. He spent 10 years coaching his two sons' baseball and basketball teams. He and his wife, Colleen, are now sports parents for a high schooler and middle schooler. His column is posted weekly. [For his past columns, click here.](#)