

Finally, do come prepared for long days at the track. Age-group track meets can move slowly due to the number of events being offered and the large number of participants. Parents should expect to spend the good part of the day, up to 4-7 hours, in the stands.

The Mental Game Coach says: Complaining about the long day does not make it go any faster and those around you already know how long a day it has been. Remember, they may still be waiting for their child to compete. On the same vein, be careful about comments you make about any participants – their parent may be sitting right behind you!

Are there any special tips for watching track meets?

Track meets are like three-ringed circuses. There will often be jumping, throwing and running events going on all at the same time. If a track facility is small then some of the throwing events may be in a nearby field and not in the immediate track area.

Tip #1 - In large meets, follow event performances by watching small scoreboards near each event. The distance or height will be posted on large numbers near the event for the performer who just completed their attempt.

Tip #2 – If you are trying to time an event, especially a sprint event, do this: Start your watch upon seeing the smoke from the starter's pistol, not the sound of the gun; stop your watch when the torso (upper body) not the head, hand or foot crosses the finish line. Be sure you are in direct line with the finish line or your perspective is skewed and your time will be inaccurate.

Tip #3 – If you time races with your own watch expect that your times will almost invariably be faster than the FAT times recorded. So, don't be disappointed when official times do not match your hand timing... they almost never will.

Tip #4 – All short sprints (100, hurdles) are run in lanes the entire race on a straightaway. Everyone has their own favorite location in the stands. Find the one that you are most comfortable with.

Tip #5 – Longer sprints (200, 400) are run in lanes and require a staggered start. This means that outside lanes are moved ahead to equalize the distance run. Outside lanes run further than inside lanes otherwise. The fastest or “seeded” lanes are typically your middle lanes (3, 4, 5). The inside lanes (1, 2) have the benefit of being able to see all their competitors however, their turns are more acute and usually (but NOT always) are more difficult to run faster times. Likewise, the outside lanes have a more gradual turn but have the disadvantage of not being able to see their competitors. It is often difficult to know who is really in the lead until the runners hit the final straightaway and are running for the finish.

Tip #6 – You can follow how many laps left in races by observing a lap counter stationed at the start/finish line. The number showing indicates the number of laps left in the race.

Tip #7 – Most distance races are started on the same line. That line is a curved line to give everyone an equal distance to run. This line is called a “waterfall” start line.

Tip #8 – Be sure to stay quiet especially if you are near the starting line during starts of any races. It is distracting to runners and can cause a false start. False starts can disqualify a runner.

Tip #9 – Listen closely for the event calls. The first call is typically 20 minutes or so before the actual event. The second call is about 5-10 minutes before the event. The final call means that the competitors should be at the start location of the event; the event is about to begin.

Tip #10 – If you are timing a relay, remember that it is the baton that is being timed not the individual. So, if you take split times for each person it is not when the baton leave their hand and goes to the next runner, it is when the baton goes past the start/finish line for the long relays. The short relays (4x100) are very difficult to get accurate splits for each runner for this very reason.

What are some specific recommendations to help my child be the best possible and create a healthy atmosphere?

Parents are well-meaning in their attempts to encourage their children to participate and perform well. Every parent wants to be proud of their child's efforts. However, there are things we as parents do and say that are truly dispiriting if not damaging to a child's sports experience. How you interact with your child, the questions you ask, the pressure you place on your child to perform create an environment. That environment may in fact hurt performances more than help; and hurt a child's development not help. Based in sport psychology and child development here are some recommendations.

Do not try to relive your athletic career through your child. And please, refrain from regaling your child with stories of your athletic prowess or failures. This is about them not you.

Do not discuss issues with the coach on meet day. Save it for another time. Leave coaching to the coach. The more input your child has, especially on competition day; the more likely it is going to have a negative effect on performance. Coaching should be done by coaches and take place during practices. During competitions it is ill-advised to make changes in form or technique. Competitions are for competing not refining techniques. Save it for practice.

Do not contradict your coach. If you do not like what they are doing you should be looking for another coach. You demonstrate disrespect by doing so and this will not be overlooked by your child.

Avoid setting outcome goals for your child going into a competition. Saying things like "I know you can beat that girl today" or "you have to throw a qualifying distance today" is not helpful. Instead it raises expectations with which pressure and negative consequences come along. The child more often will think - "what if" I don't do it? This raises stress levels, frustration and that leads to a loss of confidence. The exact opposite of what was intended.

Supportive and Unsupportive Comments

Make supportive comments. If you want to reinforce a single simple key for the competition, keep it brief and to the point. Here are some examples of supportive comments

“have fun in that race”	“think light and fast”	“one jump at a time”
“pop on those throws”	“think <i>tough</i> ”	“one throw at a time”
“just have fun”	“one step at a time”	“go enjoy yourself”
“run hard that last lap”	“one lap at a time”	“go get ‘em”

Avoid comments relating to failures such as “don’t choke” or “don’t lose it in the last lap” or “don’t foul on your jumps like last time.” Your comments provide a focal point. Performances are enhanced by focusing on what to do as opposed to what to avoid. Too many instructions create a mental overload for a child competitor. Even at the highest levels with elite adult athletes, the best coaches practice simple targeted specific comments.

If your comments focus solely on a time or distance or a win or loss then you demonstrate that those things are most important to you. If you ask if they had fun today, did their best today, tried their hardest today, learned something today, or met someone interesting today; then you place an emphasis on process goals and other more global values instead of just “wins and losses.”

Be sure that you demonstrate that you love your child regardless of how they perform. Do not withhold affection or hugs. Even remaining silent after a poor performance will convey that you do not accept them - win or lose. Your body language as well as your verbal interactions will demonstrate clearly how you feel. Children often attach their self-esteem to how they perform.

Your post competition discussions are important. Your post competition questions and discussions shape what you value. You have to start with tempering your own reactions to the performance. After a competition allow for some time before analyzing the performance. Find a couple things that you observed that were done well. Ask your child what they think they did well in that race, jump or throw. This is a time to have a

two-way open discussion. Picking apart a performance on the ride home is not a good idea. Leave coaching observations for practice.

Failure in sports is normal. Making mistakes is a part of sports. In baseball getting a hit 30% of the time makes you an All-star. That means they failed to get a hit 70% of the time. Athletes will not set records or even get faster or jump longer in each successive competition. You will not see that at Olympic levels and it most certainly won't happen at the youth level. Perfectionistic qualities are a double-edged sword. They can help focus practices to improve. They also make athletes too obsessed with stats, places, scores while losing perspective of competition.

Get back to being a parent. Your lives should not revolve around discussing competition successes and failures or performance improvement. Focus on a balanced life.

Can I take pictures at the meet?

Though we do not intend to make this a photography how-to manual; there are some important pointers for the average parent-photographer to help make the most of your picture taking.

First and foremost, ask an official before ever getting on the track or in the field to take any pictures at all. To get any pictures worthwhile you'll need to get close to the action with most cameras. Otherwise, you'll end up with some unidentifiable athlete in the middle of the track or field. Even if you are getting close to the action – get permission. There is a lot of action going on and it's not just your son or daughter's event. Do not obscure other spectator's views. Field events have zones you cannot enter and throwing events can be quite dangerous to just hang out if you are not fully aware of flying implements. If your focus is on the camera focus and not the 12 pound piece of metal hurtling through air, you could end up really out of focus... for good! One way to keep your position for picture taking in perspective is to think what would happen if every parent in the stands decided to take the same picture from where you are! The competition comes first. Spectators come second. Your picture is in third place.