

# "I can coach my son better than you" - Dealing with critical parents: How would you handle it?

Published 12/12/17 by [Simon Browning](#)

Lonzo Ball



*Los Angeles Lakers guard Lonzo Ball (2) dribbles against Boston Celtics guard Demetrius Jackson (9) during the first half at Thomas & Mack Arena. Credit: Joe Camporeale-USA TODAY Sports*

**What do you do when a parent questions your ability to coach the team? In this case study I take the example of LaVar Ball and his interactions with the LA Lakers, NBA team, and see what can happen when there is a divergence of views between coach and parent.**

"With the second pick of the 2017 NBA draft, the Los Angeles Lakers select ... Lonzo Ball".

In many respects, this should be the start of the story. However, this was a story that had been building and dominating sporting news for months in advance. A highly rated point guard out of storied UCLA, Lonzo Ball was talked about as a one in a generation player, someone capable of raising the game of all those around him. A coach's dream. Certainly what the Lakers needed as they sought to rebuild their team with a host of young players and who was destined to be the face of the franchise for years to come.

But with the positives came the negatives. While scouts and critics raved about Lonzo's work ethic and passing ability, there was a shadow hanging over everything – his father LaVar Ball.

Lonzo is the eldest of three brothers, and LaVar had a clear plan – send them all through the famous UCLA programme and get drafted by the Lakers. Lonzo was already there. LiAngelo was on his way, and the youngest, LaMelo, was one of the highest rated high school players and set to follow.

This plan, though, was to be realised no matter what the cost. No matter who was affected. It revolved around constantly hogging the news and dominating sporting conversations to consistently maintain their name at the forefront of everything. If someone, or some organisation, said anything negative about the Balls then they were ruthlessly attacked, and LaVar Ball was not shy to stir up the media, constantly giving them sound bites that they could not help but latch onto.

"LaVar Ball Says He'd Beat Michael Jordan 1-on-1 with 1 Arm Tied Behind His Back"  
[Bleacher Report](#) headline, August 2017

What should have been about Lonzo, was becoming about LaVar and his direct, in-your-face style certainly got under a lot of people's skin. Whether it was a public feud with Charles Barkley or antics that prompted a Nike executive to say that LaVar is the "[worst thing to happen to basketball in the last hundred years](#)", he created a media circus and fed it regularly.

Lavar Ball



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## *LaVar Ball the father of Los Angeles Lakers player Lonzo Ball with sons LaMelo Ball and LiAngelo Ball in attendance at Toyota Sports Center. Credit: Gary A. Vasquez-USA TODAY Sports*

Recently, LaVar has taken again to the media to complain about the coaching staff at the Lakers, and especially how he feels that they are utilising Lonzo. Never one to shy away from giving his thoughts, LaVar openly criticised both the coaching staff and players and, given his media appeal, it was brought immediately into the public arena through all major news outlets.

“LaVar Ball says Lakers ‘don’t know how to coach’ his son Lonzo”  
[Washington Post](#) headline, November 2017

Coaches always expect some form of criticism. It is impossible to have a team of any size, complete with assistant staff, and the wider circle of family and friends and have everyone completely happy at all times. Every player, not on the field wants to be. Everyone prefers to be a starter rather than a substitute. Criticism from the terraces over selections, or playing styles is always expected. For larger, more high profile teams, the media also adds in a further dimension as they constantly look for that next juicy story of scandal or dissension in the team. But what do you do when it grows out of all proportions?

Not all of us are coaching in situations like Luke Walton, trying to deal with the pressures of coaching an NBA franchise alongside trying to deal with a figure like LaVar Ball. However, many of us can see parallels within our own arenas. If you are in a team sport, at some point it is likely that you have had a standout player. Someone that is that level ahead of the rest of the team. As you go down the ages, then these differences can become more pronounced as children develop at different speeds. Trying to manage that relationship can be tricky. Maintaining the balance that allows the player to develop without damaging the team as a whole is not an easy task. When that standout player is matched with a critical, overbearing parent then things can get really difficult. When that parent is also able to influence team policies then it can become almost impossible.

Luke Walton



## *Los Angeles Lakers head coach Luke Walton reacts during the second half against the LA Clippers at Staples Center. Credit: Kelvin Kuo-USA TODAY Sports*

So how do you handle the situation when you have this highly vocal parental critic? For Luke Walton, it is a case of distancing himself from the situation. Maintaining that his relationship is with Lonzo rather than LaVar, and that it is this that he concentrates on, Luke Walton has sought to treat the situation just like he would if it was a random person from the stands.

“Laker’s Luke Walton brushes LaVar Ball’s criticisms over coaching Lonzo aside”  
[Sporting news.com](#) headline, December 2017

“Lakers’ Luke Walton on LaVar Ball criticism: Parents won’t make our coaching decisions”  
[CBSSports.com](#) headline, December 2017

However, there is the risk that if this is left unaddressed it will start to pull the team apart. Already the influence of LaVar and, more importantly, his access to the media have led the Lakers to enforce a rule that prohibits the media from conducting interviews in the family area. While the Lakers are keen to say this was an existing policy there is no doubt that its recent enforcement is designed to limit LaVar’s access to the media following games. The attack on Luke Walton was not the first time LaVar had publicly criticised a coach of one of his kids. In October, he had already pulled LaMelo out of high school citing:

“It’s a new coach and I don’t like him one bit. He’s [LaMelo] on track for UCLA but he doesn’t have to be dealing with those knuckleheads”  
[Sports Illustrated](#), October 2017

For a young team looking to grow and develop, the constant negativity can be dangerous.

At lower, amateur levels, and especially at younger age ranges, it is constantly discussed how it is imperative to bring the parents on board with what you are doing. In just the same way as it is important to build a positive culture within the team, so it is also important to extend this to those people that operate that support role. LaVar is, without a doubt, an extreme example but the disruption that he brings shows what can happen when you get a divergence in views between coach and parent over what is best for the player. While it can not be said that the Lakers went

into the relationship without knowing what they were getting themselves into, and must have plans in place to deal with it, for many of us we don't have that luxury. At the community level we are not always able to be selective over who we have within the team. Usually we take in anyone who wants to play in a model of inclusivity. Having clear guidelines and policies in place is a key tool to managing this relationship. Both sides need to know from the outset what is considered acceptable behaviour and this needs to be monitored and followed up. Policies without consequences are not worth having no matter how hard it might be.

Ultimately, though, the culture of the team will be the main driving force behind everything – in either direction. A strong, positive team culture will be capable of bringing together a range of personalities while a fragmented culture based on individuals and lack of accountability will allow the rise of dominant individuals to the detriment of the rest.

After reading this consider the following questions:

- Do you agree with Luke Walton's approach? If not how would you handle it differently?
- Have you had to deal with a pushy, highly critical parent? How did you handle the situation?
- What policies do you have in place to manage player and parent behaviour?
- How do you interact with parents / family to bring them into the team culture?
- How do you manage player development when there is a standout player?

Please put answers into the comments below.

*This blog is also available as a podcast on a number of platforms including Itunes. [Listen here.](#)*

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