

I ♥ TO WATCH YOU PLAY

MY PARENTS MADE ME INTO A PROFESSIONAL ATHLETE

by Matt Birk—Special feature for I Love to Watch You Play



As a father of eight kids, we are always “in season.” I spend a lot of time on the sidelines and in the stands. As a retired professional athlete, a lot of parents ask me the “secret” to making it in the NFL. The reason I made it was because of two people—my parents. Here was their philosophy when it came to sports:

1. “Go outside and play.” My parents didn’t want us inside very much. Maybe because our house wasn’t very big and my two brothers and I would inevitably end up fighting in the close quarters, but my parents chased us out of the house whenever the sun was out, and even when it wasn’t. We didn’t have cable TV. We weren’t even allowed to watch television during the week. We had to find other kids and figure out something to play.

Result—I developed a natural love of sports that is entirely my own. Also, I think this helped nurture my intrinsic motivation when it came to athletics, which helped me work myself into a decent enough athlete to play multiple sports in high school. Those experiences were invaluable

to me because I made friends and memories.

2. “We don’t care if you win or lose, just give it your best effort.” I can’t tell you how many millions of times I heard this growing up. But I don’t think I started actually believing it until I got to the NFL. My rookie year I was really struggling, and I realized then I just might not be good enough to make it. So, instead of worrying about what was going to happen to me, I just focused on giving absolutely 100% effort.

Result—If I had to boil down my life’s philosophy, this would be it. Focusing on my effort allows me to worry less and accomplish more in everything I do.

3. “Homework first, sports second.” A very effective tool when it came to getting me to do my schoolwork when, in reality, I had very little interest in school. But this policy also taught me the proper order and perspective.

Result—The irony is my football career would have most likely ended after high school had I not been a good student. I was not recruited by any big time schools. But I was a pretty good student and a decent enough football player that I qualified for the Ivy League, and I ended up playing at Harvard.

4. “We’ll be there.” My parents made it to every game—literally. It didn’t matter when or where, they would find a way or sacrifice and make sure they were in the stands. However, they were seen and not heard. Never once did they yell something at me, positive or negative.

Result—It made me proud of them. I think I played hard because I wanted them to be proud of me. As a parent, I truly understand the importance of “being there” for your kids because I experienced it.

The point is I wasn’t raised to be a professional athlete. My parents saw athletics for what they are intended to be—a useful tool in the physical, social, and emotional development of a child. It just so happened I was blessed with certain skills that allowed me to become an NFL player. I don’t think parents can “make” professional athletes, but they certainly can destroy them by taking away a kid’s joy.



Because my experience with sports as a kid was a healthy one, I still love sports to this day. It's a way for me to spend time and bond with my kids. I live a healthy lifestyle due to the habits I developed as an athlete. There's no question the life skills and lessons I learned on the field and court as a youth serve me well today in my professional life.

Believe me, I know it's hard sometimes keeping our emotions in check when we watch our kids play. I struggle with it from time to time. I strongly believe in competition. I do

believe in striving to win. I don't believe everyone should get a trophy. But at the beginning and end of every contest, we need to remind ourselves of the purpose of sports: growth and development for our children. (And, oh yeah, maybe have a little fun as well!)

Youth sports have the potential to teach kids a lot about themselves and a lot about life. But it doesn't just happen by signing up for a team; parents and coaches need to guide and direct these experiences. Be cognizant and intentional about the

overall development of your child. Be part of creating a healthy sports culture, not just for your kid, but for your team as well. Your kid is depending on you. And so is mine.

Matt Birk is a Harvard graduate and former Pro Bowl center for the Minnesota Vikings and Baltimore Ravens. Birk and his wife, Adrianna, are the parents of eight children and encourage and promote education through their H.I.K.E. Foundation.