

# The Columbus Dispatch

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## SPORTS

# Rob Oller: Moms deserve a special something for doing everything for their young athletes

**Rob Oller** The Columbus Dispatch

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Truth: Mothers too often get overlooked in their child's athletic career. In reality, moms keep the franchise afloat by holding down multiple jobs as coach, equipment manager, chef and travel coordinator. They also serve as player agent by encouraging their kids behind the scenes and promoting them in public.

My 92-year-old mother, Joanna, never missed a track meet — sitting through a four-hour meet in 40-degree weather should earn any mom a halo — and I am grateful she “gave it to me straight” even as she loved me unconditionally.

Kids, listen to your mother. Pay attention when she tells you to get rid of your old track spikes —the ones you consider a good-luck charm — before they disintegrate in the rain during a state-qualifying race. Mom, you were right. I was wrong.

But on this Mother's Day, let us turn things over to better-known athletes and coaches so they can share thoughts on how their moms impacted their sporting lives. (Comments edited for length and clarity).

**Chris Holtmann, Ohio State men's basketball coach.** My dad had to work a lot, so my mom (Patty) would throw the baseball with me, rebound for me and cart me around to my sporting events. She was always supportive, but tough, too, especially if I didn't play well or if I was a bad teammate. Our program has been blessed with young men with incredibly strong mothers. They are a gift.

**Gene Smith, Ohio State athletic director.** My mother, Elizabeth Smith, was a registered nurse at University Hospitals in Cleveland for 33 years. She was born in Hawthorne, Florida, and was among the many Blacks who migrated in the late 1940s to the north.

While my dad instilled in me a strong work ethic, my mother taught me compassion, humility and embedded in me how to respect all people. She helped me align my sports lessons with life lessons, taught me emotional intelligence and showed me the care she extended every day with people, regardless of who they were or where they were from. My mom had a great bedside manner and was a great listener and I have tried to emulate her special gifts in my life.

**Bobby Carpenter, former NFL and Ohio State linebacker.** What's interesting is people usually think of your dad being super-involved in your sports. My dad coached me in football, but growing up it was my mom (Susie) who took me to everything she could. She was the one setting up the car pools, making sure there was food at home so when you get back from practice you have something to eat. You need your practice jersey washed and all of a sudden it's 10 p.m. and mom is out there hand-washing it.

It's important to understand the roles moms play in their son's athletics. They're not usually out on the field, but they're the ones who do everything behind the scenes that make it all possible.

I can't overstate what Mother's Day means to me from the standpoint of what my mother did for me during my playing career.

**Stephanie Hightower, former Ohio State hurdler and Olympic qualifier.** The joke in our house was that as long as my parents could get to a track meet they were there, but as soon as the gun went off my mom (Barbara) would close her eyes. She never watched a full race.

She was my biggest cheerleader and fan. Every time I went home to Louisville and attended church with her, she was my biggest publicist, telling everyone who I was and bragging, "She did this and she did this ..." Between me and my uncle (Pro Football Hall of Famer Paul Warfield), we always joked we should have paid her, because she told everyone about our careers.

**John Cooper, former Ohio State football coach.** I am one of six kids, three brothers and two sisters. I cannot imagine anyone having a sweeter, harder-working mom. We lived on a small farm and raised almost everything we ate. My mom (Mildred) cooked three hot meals every day, mostly vegetables from the garden or vegetables she had canned.

I played three sports in high school, got home late almost every night and she always had a hot meal waiting for me. I regret not spending more time with my mom and dad. I went in

the Army out of high school, then to college from there and coached all over the country. I was only able to come back home to see my parents for a few weeks each summer.

My mom lived with my youngest sister who took care of her until she passed away. I was in New Orleans with the team preparing for our 1999 Sugar Bowl game with Texas A&M when I got the news. Her last words to my sister were, "When's the game?" She truly was always the wind beneath my wings.

**Scoonie Penn, former Ohio State point guard.** Mother's Day is my favorite holiday because my mom (Allegra) is my hero. Without her I don't have a chance in life. She showed me love every day, the way she took care of our family. For that I am forever grateful.

**Ben Hartsock, former NFL and Ohio State tight end.** Some of my most cherished childhood memories with Mom come from a simple place: rides to practice, which was a routine we repeated countless times. Cruising in our wood-paneled minivan, we would listen to a sampling of Beach Boys tapes or 97.9 WNCI. We would discuss our day at school (she taught first grade) and what was expected at practice. Some days we goofed off and sang along to music, other days we had deeper conversation.

But the constant was her presence — every practice, every game, every day. My mom showed our family love in a multitude of ways, but rides to practice were usually a time that was just us. And I am so thankful for those numerous opportunities to spend uninterrupted quality time with my mom. Happy Mother's Day, Mom. Love you.

Co-signed by all of us.

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