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by Dan Skeen

Danny Ainge picked up the kids from school yesterday.

It's a small milestone for someone with a stellar 10-year NBA career, two championships, and a 136-90 coaching record.

But he felt like a champion. And the 40-year-old father of six has become one of a growing number of working fathers who realize childhood won't wait for the postseason or the quarter-end.

In the aftermath of the Phoenix Suns' head coach's stunning resignation on Monday, the sporting world is still searching for secret motives, hidden politics or personal flaws.

But Ainge's purpose is singular, and his parting words to the press ring true: "I've been sacrificing my family to become a great coach. But anybody can coach. My wife just has one husband and my children have just one father."

There was no shortcoming on the basketball court (the Suns were off to a 13-7 start). It was his poor performance at home that stung Ainge worse than any sportswriter's criticism could. "It's been very difficult for me to enjoy seven-game winning streaks when ... I'm not living up to my responsibilities as a father and a husband."

His efforts earned him a congratulatory letter from The National Center for Fathering. Ainge's move was a boon to their organization, for bringing an unspoken but widespread work/life struggle to the public eye.

"I think it's a reminder that success on the

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playing field doesn't constitute wholeness," says Dr. Ken Canfield at the fathering center. "It's clear that he doesn't want to put his family under the same pressure that he has in the past. He wants to make changes."

Ainge's move reflects how the rules of fatherhood are being re-written. Today's new dads are hand-holding birthing coaches far removed from the cigar-bearing suits that once paced hospital waiting rooms. Stay-at-home dads no longer suffer the taunts of their beer-swilling companions, and leaving the office early for family time (usually) doesn't raise eyebrows.

But all change involves sacrifice and our ability to "be there" for family keeps butting heads with our drive for professional success. Ainge's position in the midst of the pro sports maelstrom left him no choice, no room for balance. Most of us still have the option to rebalance our careers and get more involved in our children's lives. It doesn't mean abandoning work, it means finding better ways of working.

And sometimes mid-season is the best time to start.

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