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Sportsmanship

Teaching Respect

Everyone wants athletes to respect their opponents, officials, and the game itself. Making that happen means training your coaches on how to model and teach behavior.

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If you are an athletic director in 2006, you are thinking about how to improve sportsmanship in your athletic program. You may have revamped your athlete conduct code and put initiatives in place for promoting positive behavior. Maybe one of your teams has won a sportsmanship award from your state association.

But while guidelines and positive reinforcement programs have their place, it's important that we also address the crux of the matter: Good sportsmanship is really about respect, plain and simple. When athletes respect themselves, their teammates, their opponents, and the game, sportsmanship happens.

How can an athletic director teach his or her athletes respect? That's a heck of a question without a simple answer. But it's a question we must tackle if we want to cultivate real sportsmanship in our programs.

Most people agree that respect should be taught at an early age, primarily by parents. But this obviously doesn't always happen. And even when it does, outside influences can muddy the message. When our kids see professional athletes acting inappropriately, it makes a big impact. And that's something we can't control.

What can we control? We can control what our coaches teach their athletes and what they emphasize in team meetings. We can set good examples by the way we solve problems. And we can ensure that coaches themselves exhibit respect at all times.

TALKING POINTS

At my school, I am familiar with most of the better athletes who get all of the accolades, and those who have caused some sort of problem. But I do not know the vast majority in the middle. Because of this dynamic, instilling the concept of respect becomes a huge, difficult proposition.

After all, if I held a meeting with all of our athletes to talk about sportsmanship and respect, many would probably say, "Who's that old guy and he wants to talk about what?" In addition, I've found that lecturing students isn't the most effective way to get a message across. So simply gathering the athletes together to promote respect may not be ideal.

Instead, my approach is to go through our coaches. They already have a good working relationship with their athletes and know best how to get through to them. Here are some ideas I've provided my coaches on teaching respect during their season:

Make it a daily habit: Most coaches gather their athletes together at the conclusion of a practice session to recap what they've done that day and set the scene for the next opponent. I've asked our coaches to also use that time to slip in a message about respect. Most have found this to be a natural and effective strategy.

Respect your opponent: There is no place for harassing comments, gamesmanship, or other actions that might humiliate the other side. We've all heard athletes say, "You never told me I couldn't do that!" In response, we talk a lot about the Golden Rule: simply treat others as you would like to be treated.

We ask our coaches to find teachable moments that have to do with respecting their opponents. For example, any time the mercy rule is invoked in a contest, that's a perfect opening for the coach—winning or losing—to huddle with the players the next day in practice. The coach can simply ask the team, "Why do we have a mercy rule?" From there, a discussion about respecting your opponent can easily emerge.

Respect the officials: This is an area that I ask coaches to go over in specific terms. For example, if there's a questionable call during a game, athletes are told to ask for an explanation in a quiet and appropriate manner. Some of our coaches require their athletes to thank the officials at the end of the contest. And, of course, our coaches know that they set the tone for their players and fans in how they treat officials.

Respect the game: Most athletes don't know what this means, so I ask our coaches to talk about it. At an earlier stop in my career, the football coach would counsel his players who celebrated excessively after scoring by saying, "Hey, don't make it look like this was your first touchdown. Make it look like you've been in the end zone many times before. Casually hand the ball to the official." The coach firmly believed in the dignity of the sport, not in drawing attention to yourself and away from the joy of competing.

This same approach can be taken in many other sports. Don't allow players to "quiet the crowd" by putting their finger to their mouth in basketball after a big shot or to hotdog after a home run in baseball. Anything that is not about playing the game or communicating with teammates can lead to disrespect for the sport.

Respect your resources: Athletes should also demonstrate respect for facilities and equipment. A good example occurred last spring after an evening contest at our stadium. As I walked across the field to turn off the scoreboard control panel, I noticed a bunch of bottles and candy wrappers around our opponents' team bench. As I picked them up, I made a mental note of what I found. When I e-mailed the opponent's athletic director asking her to remind the coach of her team's responsibility, I provided a complete breakdown of how the bench had been left. I am sure she turned this into a teachable moment for her team the next day.

At my school, we make a big deal out of how athletes treat our transportation services. Our athletes are expected to remove their cleats before boarding the bus and to pick up any trash before departing. On those rare occasions when I get a negative report from one of the bus companies, I remind the coach of this responsibility. It then becomes a topic of discussion with the team to ensure that we respect the company's expectations and that we are good guests. This obviously contains a larger message: Be respectful to those who are providing us a service.

Ask what they think: My favorite way for coaches to teach respect is through discussing current events. I find there is always something being reported in the newspapers that can be used by our coaches. If there is an article about a fight between pro athletes, a coach can bring the newspaper to practice and ask his players, "Hey guys, did you see this story in the paper last night?"

From there, athletes and coaches talk about how someone in the story was not respecting the opponent, the game, or maybe themselves. It gets the athletes to think more deeply about what respect means—and how to avoid any peer pressure that leads to disrespect.

THE RIGHT REACTION

In addition to being proactive about teaching respect, we sometimes need to be reactive. I let my coaches know that any problem with athletes and respect needs to be solved in a purposeful manner, and that I am available to help them.

For example, during the handshake after an away game this past spring, one of our players made a derogatory comment to one of the opposing players. Fortunately, the host team's athletic director e-mailed me the following day and I was able to forward the message to our coach with a brief suggestion on how to handle the situation at our next contest. I asked that one of our coaches stand where the two teams meet when shaking hands instead of all three coaches going to the end of the line. Players would be a little more careful with inappropriate comments knowing there was a coach observing everything.

More importantly, this incident provided an opportunity for our coach to teach why the player's comment was not acceptable. Not only did the offender get the message, but the entire squad learned something about respect. Finally, in a firm, yet fair manner, our coach explained that this young man would have to sit out the next contest. These interventions set the proper example for all of the athletes on the team.

Another incident concerned our badminton team. In Baltimore County, we have interscholastic badminton, and it's not the backyard variety. The matches are played at a high level with great skill. They are intense and extremely competitive.

However, some athletes on another team did not feel that badminton players were real athletes. One courageous and mature badminton athlete came to my office to explain that his team was enduring insults from another team.

After conferring with the coach, I approached one player from the team that was being disrespectful. This young man (I will call him Joe) was someone I knew to be mature, intelligent, and level-headed, and I was confident he would be able to handle my intervention. With his coach's okay, I asked him to meet me before going to practice. Oh, and he should wear his sneakers.

As we started our short walk to the gym, I asked if he knew any rules of badminton. He said no. After a very basic explanation involving the out-of-bounds lines and scoring, I asked if Joe would do a favor for me—for 10 minutes, would he play a little match against an athlete from the badminton team?

We could have stopped after five. Our varsity badminton player had Joe panting by then—running him up and back, using drop shots, clears, and smashes. I was exhausted just watching.

As I walked with him to the locker room to change for his practice session, I explained that I was going to meet with his team tomorrow before practice, and I wanted to mention his brief encounter with badminton—not to embarrass him, but to make my point. Joe laughed and said he'd be fine with my critique of the experiment.

At the team meeting the following afternoon, I told Joe's teammates how he had fared. I asked Joe if he thought the badminton player had any athletic ability, if he had exerted any effort, and if he was proficient. Of course, I knew what the answers would be. To conclude our little session, I gave the team a few rhetorical questions to ponder:

- Do the members of the badminton team have to go through the same eligibility procedures as everyone else before they could start the season?
- Does the badminton team care about its performance and the results of its matches?
- Do they practice for the same length of time?
- Do they represent the school in a positive manner?
- Is one sport more important than another at our school?

The entire meeting took no longer than 10 minutes and the coach was able to then immediately begin practice. I can't assume that everyone became an advocate of badminton after our talk, but I think we took some small steps toward building respect for others.

IS THE COACH THE PROBLEM?

Since a key part of this strategy is for coaches to be role models in teaching respect, I evaluate coaches in this area very carefully. Even coaches who are on board about sportsmanship and discipline don't always exhibit respect themselves, and that is simply not okay. Last fall, I had to deal with this in a big way.

Unfortunately, we had head coaches in two different sports who sometimes referred to our athletes in derogatory, disrespectful terms. One of the coaches often lost emotional

control and lashed out at his athletes. This happened during games or practice sessions when mistakes were made or when the coach thought an athlete was not working hard enough. The targets occasionally also included assistant coaches who made an adjustment in a game or an unwanted suggestion.

The other coach, in an effort to control her team, used threats and spoke in demeaning terms with some of her athletes. At the same time, the coach demanded that the athletes demonstrate respect for her. If there was a perceived moment of disrespect, the culprits were banned from practice, detailed referrals were sent to me, and the coach aired her displeasure in front of the remaining participants.

Despite a long list of witnesses, both coaches denied that these incidents ever took place. After discussing the varying perceptions of what happened and trying to impress upon both that being respectful toward our athletes was an absolute requirement, we really made no headway. They never understood that respect is a two-way street and is not automatically granted by demand. As an absolute last step, we had to make two coaching changes.

AN ONGOING PROCESS

There is one other lesson about teaching respect that took me a while to fully comprehend, but now I realize it is critical. It is that reinforcing the value of sportsmanship and respect has to be an ongoing effort.

As administrators, we can't say, "Well, we did a good job last year, we should be set." What I failed to realize for a while is that we always have an influx of new athletes, parents, and sometimes coaches every year.

Your methods and approach, while they can be updated, have to continue year in and out. Also, there will surely be new examples and stories to discuss with our athletes. All we have to do is understand this phenomenon and continually look out for new issues that arise.

Respect is one of the cornerstones of our society and our efforts in this area extend well beyond the playing fields. That's why we can't rest a second when it comes to teaching and promoting respect.

Sidebar: PARENTS ON BOARD

Unfortunately, teaching parents about respect is tougher than teaching student-athletes. My main strategy is to deliver the message in different ways at every preseason parents meeting and booster club meeting we hold. I've talked about my own experiences as the parent of a student-athlete and as a coach. I've also asked them to help me spread the word about sportsmanship, and used examples and handouts.

At this fall's parents meeting, I attached a simple six-point checklist to our scheduling information. On a single sheet, the top portion explained how to find out if a game is

postponed due to weather conditions. The bottom half included these tips, which a colleague had sent to me (they come from the Iowa Girls Coaches Association):

1. Cheer for your team, but don't ridicule the opposing team.
2. Learn the rules of the game. It will help you understand why certain situations take place.
3. Be respectful of the referee's decisions.
4. If you are a parent, try to be a "team" fan, not a "my kid" fan.
5. Be a good role model, both through your own actions and by censuring those around you whose behavior is unbecoming.
6. People may not remember the final score, but they will remember the person in Section Three who embarrassed himself.

I found this was a good, subtle way to slip the push for respect in front of parents without hitting them over the head. And since the points came from another source, it took the pressure off of me. It wasn't "that ole Hoch preaching to us again." And besides, many of the points really hit home for our particular parents.

Resources:

www.AforBW.org

Athletes for a Better World is a non-profit organization whose message centers around "The Code for Living," which promotes good sportsmanship and citizenship.

www.internationalsport.com/NSD

The Institute for International Sport at the University of Rhode Island sponsors an annual National Sportsmanship Day program and provides educational materials to interested schools.

www.sportsmanship.org

The Citizenship Through Sports Alliance states on its Web site that, "Since 1997, CTSA has been building a sports culture that encourages respect for self, respect for others, and respect for the game."

www.nfhs.org

The National Federation produces a number of videos and booklets, which can be used at a family night, banquet, or meetings of coaches and athletes.