

## **SPORTSMANSHIP ARTICLE**

### **Coaches – The Real Leaders in SPORTSMANSHIP**

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High school athletics captures it all – the excitement of competition, the thrill of wearing the school colors, learning valuable lessons for a lifetime, and the admiration of elementary and junior high kids watching their idols and dreaming of the day they will play for “Coach”.

You can catch those youngsters the next day, imitating the way their idol gets into the batter's box, or the way they break a tackle and run for a TD, or the spin move in the lane for the winning shot, or the great anchor leg in a relay, etc.

The impact of high school athletics in our schools and communities is pervasive!

In my personal and professional life, high school activities, coaches, players and fans are very special to me. There are so many more precious and memorable moments than negative ones. Perhaps that is why a negative report often makes headlines.

Expected goodness for some is not as newsworthy as the occasional “bad acting” that occurs in isolation. That is why I get upset when a media report issues a blanket criticism of kids and coaches for poor sportsmanship and then offers little or nothing to make it better. There is a sad irony that the deeds of a few will overshadow the positive efforts of many.

To those critics, who have little invested in kids, I proudly proclaim that, “Our sportsmanship at high school athletic events is better than ever. And I am convinced that the reason it is better is because of our coaches.

Yes, I said better than ever. Oh, sportsmanship can be improved, but name me one thing in our society that cannot be improved. Our athletes and coaches are under closer scrutiny by the media today that they were in previous years. If the media 30 years ago afforded high school sports the same coverage as they do today, I can assure the reader that negative articles about poor sportsmanship would have appeared perhaps more than today.

The campaign to eradicate poor sportsmanship from the playing field and the stands is not over, but it is being won. The number of negative incidents, that have always been low are even more infrequent. Being a good sport and practicing good sportsmanship is even more in vogue today than ever before because our coaches have added that emphasis to their repertoires.

Coaches understand the importance of being a role model, not just for their athletes, but for their school and community. Ninety-five percent of our coaches understand values. They understand good citizenship. They understand the difference between character building and building characters.

But moreover, they understand the rarest form of courage – the courage of their convictions. For that they collectively can stand up and take a bow. Because of that courage, our student-athletes derive the best that athletics can offer.

The coaches who model all these values comprise the 95 percent in the profession about whom I like to brag. The other five percent I would like to change or eliminate them from working with kids. We all would.

However, most of that five percent are likely not to change. A few of the young ones may change but, like our society, those who display bad sportsmanship don't build character and values that will remain a part of us.

I will stay constant in my praise for the great educators who coach and with each game display what they have taught young boys and girls. Fans can see what the kids have learned beyond X's and O's. The true importance of competition, citizenship, sportsmanship, values are ach alive. And we cannot quit talking about those coaches – the 95 percent – and all the good they accomplish by taking the game to life.

When I was a young administrator, I listened to UCLA's basketball coach John Wooden talk to a group of 100 high school coaches. I noticed two young coaches came late to the session. There were no chairs for them, so I found them a couple. Coach Wooden talked for two hours and did not put on "x" or "o" on the chalkboard. He did not talk about zones, pressure, fast breaks or screening. He did talk about building character, teaching and learning right and wrong, respect and responsibility. Most of the high school coaches were in awe. When he finished, he said, "I will be after lunch at 1 o'clock this afternoon." As the two late comers left, one said to the other, "I hope this afternoon he tells us how he wins!"

They both had missed the point! Yes "x's and o's" matter, but the most important thing a coach can do is teach the true importance of competition, citizenship, sportsmanship and values. The coaching profession turns over rapidly and we must constantly remind young coaches of the importance and influence of their position and the real challenge of their job.

Citizenship and sportsmanship is rightfully the bulkhead of any state activities association. As a state association we can send out materials on good sportsmanship, talk about importance at rules meetings, and we can have camps and clinics to help coaches.

But it is the coaches and their associations who make the difference. They are the ones who have the courage to take a stand, no matter how unpopular. In doing so they make heroes out of 95 percent in their ranks, rather than the negative five percent.

Taking any positive stance is difficult in this day and age. With the advent of kids wanting spending money, earning money, getting jobs outside of school, the alcohol problem, substance abuse issues, our coaches have more problems to address than coaches 30 years ago and 10 times the number that coaches had to address 50 years ago. These issues impact participation first and foremost. But the 95 percent are meeting the challenge. They are doing a great job. They have the courage to realize that many times it is not popular to take a stance on what they stand for and won't stand for, but they do. And in the process they win the respect and admiration of others.

Let me cite some examples of what I mean

1. Years ago my partner, David Harty and I authored one of the first books on sportsmanship. The title was "Citizenship/Sportsmanship – the Trademark of High School Athletics." We published real-life stories and articles and made it a positive book. One of the most positive articles was about Coach Paul Hustad from Colorado, who had coached for a number of years, won several championships and NEVER had a technical foul, nor did any of his players!
2. This spring at our state track meet we had some disqualifications for running out of lanes, passing the baton out of the zone etc. In previous years after violations 15-20 minutes later the runners would go to their coaches and tell them how bad the call was or some fan would tell the coach it didn't happen. This year, the minute the race was over, if there was a disqualification, that coach was called to the referee's stand and told what happened. The coach immediately related it to the boys. There was no unsportsmanlike display. In previous year we would have people taking sides. When it is properly taken care of by the coach, that is the end of it.

3. Iowa is the only state to play summer baseball. It is a sport where a certain amount of arguing is to take place, but on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being the least argumentative, our coaches are a solid 10 and our players are right behind them. The fans, oh I can't say too much against fans because they love to yell and they have all the comments you would hear in a pro park. But I attended a game this summer, where one section of the bleachers was misbehaving and taking their comments too far. Their coach walked out of the dugout and to the fence in front of them. What he said I do not know, but they cheered positively the rest of the night. When the game was over, he and his team walked over and applauded their supporters. It was a wonderful scene. You see, if the coach has the demeanor, the crowd understands what is going on. And moreover, it demonstrates that when people are given a choice between shame and pride, they will choose pride. It took a little courage from the coach, but it is courage, in my estimation, that will save high school athletics.
4. One of our well-known basketball coaches, during a game, had one of his players receive a technical foul and he immediately substituted for him. He did not berate the official or the player. The player sat down on the bench and the coach never said a word to him. I know later on some words were said, but the coach did not embarrass the player. That told everyone in the gym that he did not tolerate the action that drew the technical foul.

In Iowa about 80 percent of our high school students are in activities. I refer to our music and speech people as "coaches." They are role models just the same as our athletic coaches. Kids want to belong to a school activity. That is a given. The reason they want to belong is because they enjoy and need the experience of being around a positive role model – someone who emphasizes and practices character, the values of discipline, determination, dedication, desire, courage, loyalty, dignity and pride. It is these values that make interscholastic athletics educational and special. It is virtually impossible to coach a youngster any skill without teaching values even when some theorists say they "don't want their kids taught values."

A lot has been written about the Character Counts program and the pillars of character – truthfulness, caring, respect, responsibility, fairness and citizenship. These are characteristics of great coaches who model their lives on these pillars and they cannot help but be a powerful dynamic in the lives of their athletes. It permeates how they act in front of their students, the way they talk, the way they walk, the manner in which they respond to officials and most importantly, the way they respond to a young athlete who is having a bad day.

To me the real test is how coaches and athletes accept performance to become better. The great coach can "stretch" his/her athletes by recognizing that they can be disappointed in a performance but not with the person.

This mindset makes athletics a game and not a war. A great baseball coach may walk out to ask an umpire a question about a call, and the umpire may say, "Coach, I didn't see it that way." The great coach can return to his team and say, the umpire called it the way he saw it. That will diffuse everyone. But a lesser coach, who might try to embarrass the umpire, allows the kids and fans to lose respect for the official and thereafter on judgment calls they will believe the official is wrong.

Don't misunderstand. I believe that officials have to give coaches reasons to respect them primarily with their hard work and the manner in which they treat the kids and coaches. It is easier for a high school official to be professional when the coach is appreciative of his or her efforts.

I always love saying, "If we make as few mistakes as officials, we will win the game." In all the years that I officiated and have been associated with sports, I have never met an official who wanted to work a bad game. I have never met a youngster who wanted to play poorly, and I have yet to meet a coach who wanted to coach a poor game. Once we embrace the idea that everybody tries to the best of their ability, then high

school athletics is what we want it to be – a place where moms and dad, relatives, friends and fans can come out and cheer, have a great time and celebrate the sanctity of high school athletics.

No matter how good the coach is, he/she cannot do it all. Administrators have to give them all the support they can, and, in the process, be intolerant of the five percent who are ruining high school athletics and the image of coaching.

When a coach acts up beyond what is considered acceptable, our administrators have to demonstrate the courage to meet the challenge. When you have a coach and program worth defending, administrators must willingly give their support. The part that few people understand is that the real test is not during the contest. The real test comes when the student attends class every day and exercises respect, responsibility, caring for teammates, being truthful and being a good citizen despite what the pros and colleges are doing. Incidentally, the colleges are doing better than they were 5-10 years ago; we just hear more about the negatives. In the high schools, we all have to work at it, but the key will always be the person we call, “coach”.

I believe with all my heart the coach who makes his/her athletes better citizens is far more important than the coach who turns out one or two All-Americans and the rest of the kids poor citizens. That is why several years down the road, a former athlete will see his/her coach and say, “Take a look at me. This is what you helped produce.” For an overwhelming majority, that will be a proud moment. It is that commitment to others that distinguishes coaches. It is a commitment not for the moment but for a lifetime!

But what about winning? We hear all the time about the pressure to succeed in coaching. Everyone wants to win – that is a given in athletics. But only one team or individual wins. The axiom that dates back to ancient Rome and to returning and parading conquerors that “All glory is fleeting!” bears the same importance.

A game is a game, to be enjoyed for the moment in time, be it the season opener, the conference title, the last game of the season or the state championship. The values remain with the game, win or lose, for the 95 percent of the great coaches we have. Some are state championship coaches; others are champions in their community and in the eyes of their kids.

We are getting away from the negatives we see on television when college and professional athletes after a championship win have player dogpiles and fans storm the court or the field while the losing team waits to be congratulated. Instead, an increasing number of players, and likewise fans, at the request of their coaches, reserve those celebrations until the opponent receives its just congratulations for an effort and sportsmanship and the trophies have been awarded. We have learned that it doesn't detract from the thrill but that it enhances the total experience and emphasizes the educational experience of interscholastic competition.

Yes, coaches are leaders in improving sportsmanship. Yes, we can all do a better job, but let's start with a “sincere thank you and praise” to the 95 percent of the high school coaches and their associations for the great job they do in emphasizing sportsmanship and the values that last a lifetime. It may be a brief word, but the coaches who know little things make a difference will appreciate your recognition.

**Go for the Gold**

I'd rather see a sermon than hear one any day;

I'd rather one should walk with me than merely show the way.

The eye's a better pupil and more willing than the ear;

Fine counsel is confusing but example's always clear.

I soon can learn to do it if you'll let me see it done;

I can see your hands in action, but your tongue is too fast may run;

And the lectures you deliver may be very fine and true,

But I'd rather get my lessons by observing what you do.

For I may misunderstand you and give the high advice you give,

But there is no misunderstanding how you act and how you live.

-Anonymous