

Is civility in youth sports lacking?



From our guest contributor, Nancy Justis

“Civility” comes from the Latin word “civilitas”, which means city. A city has to be a place of civil behavior. Similar to how laws set the guidelines for society, rules are critical to every sport.

A game is something that takes place according to the rules. Cheating on the rules is as much a threat to the game as lawless behavior is a threat to civilization. Civility is not a luxury. It’s essential to the preservation and enjoyment of the game. If we can’t trust the rules and enforce them, we can’t trust the game.

According to the NYU Sports and Society program, “Sports are often referred to as fun and games. And they are, but they are far more than that. Sports are a reflection of the most fundamental norms and values that shape human society. Sports represent escape from the world, but they also are a huge

presence within the world, accounting for hundreds of billions of dollars in revenue and bringing together more nations and groups than any political entity is capable of doing.

“Sports are a test bed for science and medicine, as well as for teaching, communicating and mentoring. Sports are big business. Sports fuel the media. Sports are critical to advertising and merchandising many of the world’s most lucrative products. Sports shape the beliefs and values of our children. Sports have and can lead the way in societal reform and ethical progress. Sports create our heroes, villains, and pariahs.”

And according to the Josephson Institute Center for Sports Ethics and the Arizona Sports Summit Accord, “sports can and should enhance the character and uplift the ethics of the nation. Participation in sports is a privilege, not a right. At its best, athletic competition can hold intrinsic value for our society. It is a symbol of a great ideal: pursuing victory with honor. Sports are a major social force that shapes the quality and character of the American culture.”

Sports in itself is an entertainment culture. However, youth sports needs to be a development zone culture, striving towards “Better Athletes, Better People”, the goal of the Iowa Youth Sports Initiative in step with Positive Coaching Alliance. The culture of “win at all costs” has no place in youth sports. Adults taking over the sports play from the kids has no place in youth sports. Breaking the bank for travel teams, club play versus school play, both of which eliminate certain sections of the populace, have no place in youth sports.

How did we get here?

The culture and pressures to win over learning life lessons and simply having fun have materialized at the top and have

trickled down to youth sports. Having power over rather than respect for the game. That's difficult to turn off once it's been turned on.

Bullying, harassment and intimidation are often tolerated because they become perceived as normal. This is especially true where high-energy, high-ambition attitudes prevail such as in a locker room. Peers can look at bullies as popular leaders worthy of respect. They often have high social status which grants them power.

Abusive conduct such as bullying cannot exist but for an organizational culture that allows it. Sports programs are inherently competitive, and contact sports encourage aggressive behavior. When athletes are rewarded for running faster, hitting harder and throwing further than their peers, it is understandable that especially younger athletes have difficulty understanding that aggressive behavior is unacceptable beyond the boundaries of the game.

Research shows that those bullied are seven times more likely to be depressed and are more likely to be suicidal. Bullies have a greater risk of health and stability problems, including higher rates of alcoholism, drug use, and of dropping out.

Each of us should look at ourselves and ask if we've personally had experiences with disrespect, abuse or bullying by a coach, athlete or parent. What did you do about it?

How do you develop a positive locker room culture? The Honor Call system is one way. A Northwestern College volleyball coach developed the system where players self-report when they touch a ball even if the referees don't see the infraction. She and her staff initiated a series of concepts that would help her players govern life both on and off the court, including integrity.

Each of us is responsible for positive outcomes. How we get

there is what's important. Respect and sportsmanship do not come naturally. We want to win, but not at all costs – it's about the journey. To be ethical is a deliberative thought.

For more information on civility in youth sports, [click here](#).



Nancy Justis has over 40 years of journalistic experience ranging from newspaper and magazine writing and editing, to collegiate public relations. At a time when women were a virtual non-entity in the athletics media relations field, she blazed the trail. She has over 30 years of experience in the promotion of sports teams and working with student-athletes. She was Sports Information Director/Assistant Athletics Director for Media Relations at the University of Northern Iowa for most of those years, publicizing the Panthers' nationally-recognized men's basketball and football teams. She is a member of the Cedar Valley Character Counts Committee and serves on the board of the Cedar Valley Sports Commission. She freelance writes for various publications.

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