



SPORTSMANSHIP

University of Texas cornerback Ryan Palmer concentrates on the game, while the banner behind him reminds fans of their role on game day.



Behind Every Great Team

... Is a support network to keep it on track. Today, part of the backup includes innovative ideas in sportsmanship.

By Kyle Garratt



If maintaining good sportsmanship was a one-person job, most athletic directors would tackle it easily. But, in reality, it's a task that relies on everyone doing the right thing—from athletes and coaches to parents and fans.

Student-athletes need to learn the importance of respect and how to handle disappointments. But how can a team find the time for such lessons in a season filled with practices, contests, and various team activities?

Coaches continue to get out of control during games, which trickles down to their athletes and incites fans in the stands. But what is the right incentive to help them keep their emotions in check?



Fostering good sportsmanship among spectators can be a tricky balancing act. You want your fans to be passionate and enjoy the game, while also understanding what is and what is not appropriate. With this group, how can you explain the thin line that separates the two?

No one claims to have the perfect answers for any of these questions. But many athletic administrators are coming up with innovative new ways to handle them.

IN THE POCKETBOOK

Actions speak louder than words. Now, several high school state athletic associations are hoping that money speaks louder than actions. In an effort to keep coaches in

"The program teaches athletes how to deal with frustration, how to treat other people with respect, and team concepts ... When things don't turn out how you would like, how do you stop and think before you react?"

line on the sidelines, Ohio, Texas, Oregon, North Carolina, Alabama, and Florida are handing out fines to coaches who are ejected from games.

In most cases, the fines are in addition to game suspensions and mandatory coaching courses for offenders. The National Federation of State High School Associations' (NFHS) online Fundamentals of Coaching course is most commonly required of ejected coaches, and initial fines range from \$100 to \$300 for first offenders.

The Ohio High School Athletic Association (OHSAA) is one of the most recent groups to enact the policy, as this fall, it began to fine ejected coaches \$100 and require them to take the NFHS Fundamentals of Coaching course. "Through the years, the number of coaches ejected has steadily increased," says OHSAA Assistant Commissioner Jerry Snodgrass. "Several steps were taken to curb the rise and nothing seemed to work. The general consensus was to hit them in the pocketbook and see if that gets anyone's attention."

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Snodgrass knows that a \$100 fine won't wipe out coaches' bank accounts, but hopes it will serve as enough of an incentive to change behavior. "I think it has made coaches think twice about their actions and why they are not supposed to act in a manner that gets them ejected," he says.

The fine can also serve as a conversation starter between athletic director and coach. "When an ejection and fine occurs, it's important to sit down with your coach and talk about the incident," says Chris Potts, Director of Athletics at Upper Arlington (Ohio) High School, who had to do just that when an assistant boys' soccer coach was ejected and fined for arguing a call. "Ultimately, we need to make sure that our coaches know it's about how we react and what we teach our kids if we do make a mistake.

"Our coach used it as a teachable moment for our kids about how the emotion of the game can catch up with you," Potts continues. "He was trying to stick up for a player who he thought had been failed, but ultimately, arguing is not going to get you anywhere. Our coach took the penalty along with responsibility for his actions. He let our kids know he wasn't the role model he was supposed to be in that moment."

Snodgrass says that he won't be able to tell if the policy is definitively helping decrease ejections until the end of the school year when he can compare ejection numbers to last year. Regardless, Potts believes the fine serves as a constant reminder to coaches about their role.

"I think the new rule sets the expectations high, which they should be," Potts says. "And it allows schools and administrators to have good conversations with their coaches about the importance of sportsmanship."

STOP & THINK

Those conversations also need to happen with student-athletes. But how many of your coaches build that time into their practice plans? "We teach our athletes how to tackle, block, and kick, but we don't always remember to talk to them about how to behave on the field or how to respond to fans and refs," says Scott Brown, Athletic Director at Clinton (Miss.) High School.

One solution some state associations, college conferences, and individual schools are turning to is the STAR sportsmanship program. The Alabama High School Athletic Association (AHSAA) and the Mississippi High School Activities Association (MHSAA) are now both requiring all of

their student-athletes to complete the training in order to be eligible.

STAR stands for Stop, Think, Act, and Replay, and is an interactive program that students can complete online. It introduces them to different scenarios, such as when a call goes against them, and challenges them to choose the best reaction.

"It teaches athletes how to deal with frustration, how to treat other people with respect, and team concepts," says Brown. "When things don't turn out how you would like, how do you stop and think before you react?"

Bruce Robinson, Head Boys' Basketball Coach at Clinton, says it has worked well for his team. "I like that it gives me a tool to teach sportsmanship to our kids in a new and unique way," he says. "It puts a different light on the topic, so we all got a new perspective that I think has stuck with us."

Along with getting student-athletes excited about sportsmanship, the STAR program has versions for younger children, parents, officials, and coaches. A group of boosters from Clinton recently went through the course to show support for their kids and good sportsmanship. The MHSAA required its coaches complete the course this school year and the AHSAA will require coaches to do the same next year.

The best part is that it's working. The MHSAA reported a 44-percent reduction in player ejections, and a 50-percent reduction in coach ejections for 2008 football as compared to fall 2007. Steve Savarese, Executive Director of the AHSAA, also likes that the program allows student-athletes across the state to have the same training. And member schools like the convenience factor.

"With the program online, it's accessible," Savarese says. "Kids can complete it at home or in a school computer lab. Athletic directors just distribute one login code for their entire school and that's it."

BATTLE OF WILLS

Prevailing wisdom says that when coaches and athletes display sportsmanship, the fans will follow. However, this past football season, several college athletic directors found that sometimes it takes a lot more to convince student fans to display appropriate behavior.

In August, the University of Virginia informed its students that it would ban signs and banners at all athletic events. Athletic Director Craig Littlepage said the university chose to disallow them because they were creating a visual obstruction and there were sportsmanship concerns regarding the content of some of the signs.



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The decision was met with resistance from the student body, which reportedly threatened to wear blue instead of the traditional orange to a home football game against Maryland as a protest. Students also brought blank signs to a home game against Richmond earlier in the year. As debate on the topic grew heated, Littlepage chose to repeal the ban on Oct. 2.

"There was more energy focused on the signs than there was on the team," says Littlepage. "I wanted the fans to be supportive of the team and not have the signs detract from that."

Littlepage's decision to reverse the ban came a day after he met with several student leaders on the issue and there have been no incidents since. "We had a good discussion about our mutual goals of how to best support the team and how there might be ways in which allowing signs could help generate support," says Littlepage.

Virginia Tech is one school that has successfully banned signs from its football and basketball games, a policy it enacted over a decade ago. Tom Gabbard, Associate Athletic Director for Internal Affairs, says there

was some resistance to the rule when it was first implemented, but it didn't boil over.

"We presented it as being user friendly for everybody in the stands, in terms of safety and not blocking views, and got more positive feedback than negative," he says. "But sometimes you hit a nerve at the wrong time and it turns into a bigger deal than it needs to be. I think that's what happened at Virginia."

The University of Kansas had a similar standoff with its student fans this fall. For the past two football seasons, they have chanted "Rip his (expletive) head off," as the Jayhawks kick off. This year, members of the athletic department, including Head Football Coach Mark Mangino, made public pleas through the media asking fans to stop the chant.

Mangino then recorded a video request, which played on the video board at home football games before the opening kickoff. The student newspaper pitched in by holding a contest in which students voted online for a new chant with the winning submis-

sion being displayed on the scoreboard during kickoffs.

"The administration, student leadership, and student newspaper hoped that by discussing this in terms of class and intelligence,

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the student body itself would decide, 'You know, this is not the way we want to portray ourselves,'" says Jim Marchiony, Associate Athletics Director of External Affairs. "We hoped that by the students themselves bringing this forward, it would spur other students

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to take care of themselves and come up with a more appropriate chant.”

However, each of the measures was met with limited success and the athletic department has resorted to playing music through the kickoff to drown out the chant. Marchiony says the topic has become less about the actual chant and more a battle of wills.

“It’s not a large segment of the student population that is doing this and our student leadership is opposed to it, which is something that we constantly remind people,” says Marchiony. “But I really don’t know what else you can do when a certain segment of the student population is ignoring its own leadership.

“When the students doing the chant come back as alumni with their five-year-olds, they will understand that this is not the way they would want themselves or their university portrayed,” he continues. “Unfortunately, those students don’t have that perspective right now.”

POWER OF PRIDE

The University of Texas thinks it may have a solution to the above problems. It has

begun a PR campaign that preaches positive sportsmanship in a proactive way and links it to school spirit. The idea began after its football team played road games against two historically dominant football programs, and experienced two vastly different scenes.

At one venue, the hometown fans openly cursed players and fans from Texas and fights broke out. In the second game, Texas snapped a home winning streak of a Big 12 foe whose spectators were courteous throughout the game and applauded the Texas players afterwards. The fans of each team made separate and lasting impressions on the Texas Exes, UT’s alumni association.

“When you see that kind of contrast between two major universities, it’s shocking,” says Texas Exes Executive Director Jim Boon. “It was a wake-up call that we certainly didn’t want people coming to Austin

and feeling like this was an awful place or that they had not been treated fairly. Those incidents spurred us to make our fans better sportsmen.

To start, the athletic department revamped its code of conduct to make it more specific. It now includes a no-tolerance policy in which athletes are suspended for one year for unsportsmanlike behavior, ranging from athletes’ conduct during games to drug and alcohol use at school events. All athletes and their parents must sign the policy.

“We recognized that we weren’t going to change society or people’s behavior overnight, but perhaps if we set our expectations higher, we would be able to affect behavior at our athletic events,” continues Boon. “We launched a multi-year campaign and came up with the slogan, ‘Texas Fans Make Us Proud,’ which has a double meaning. Texas fans really do make us proud, but it’s also a command or a declaration.”

The association has publicized the catch phrase on as many surfaces as it can, including T-shirts, banners, and cups at athletic events and posters around campus. Coaches speak about the campaign at press conferences and games. When opponents land at the Austin airport, they are greeted with banners that read “Welcome to Austin. We’re Glad You’re Here. Texas Fans Make Us Proud.” Each visiting team’s alumni association also receives a kit eight months prior to their trip to Texas that maps out where they can hold tailgate parties.

“We try to take as much hassle out of visiting Austin as we possibly can because we want opposing fans to have a good experience while they’re here,” says Boon. “While you can’t really measure whether something like this has an impact or not, my sense is that it has made us better sports fans. We’ve received hundreds of comments and notes from other schools’ alumni saying they enjoyed their time here and that our fans were great.”

Looking to engage more students in the campaign, the Exes hit the Web this past season with the Take Ten project. Students submitted 10-second videos about good

A GREAT SAVE

It’s not often that a team will pass up a chance at a free victory. But in November, the defending NAIA champion Azusa Pacific University men’s soccer team chose to do just that.

A week before APU was set to play Westmont College for the Golden State Athletic Conference championship and a berth into the NAIA tournament, a fire ravaged Westmont destroying 15 percent of the campus, including dorms, faculty housing, and Head Coach Dave Wolf’s home. The Westmont athletes clearly would not be able to prepare for and play APU.

Rather than accepting a forfeit, though, APU delayed the game by two days, invited the Westmont players onto its campus, fed them, and allowed them to recover from the week’s tragic events. On game day, hundreds of Westmont fans made the two-hour trip to Azusa and were welcomed by Azusa with open arms, complimentary admission to the game, and a free lunch of pizza and salad. Westmont then won an emotional game, 2-0, against the favored Cougars.

Westmont went on to win two more games in the NAIA tournament, including a 3-2 overtime victory in the opening round over Holy Names University. But Azusa may have been the biggest winner, becoming a model for great sportsmanship nationwide.



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sportsmanship and a panel of alumni and fellow students selected a winner, which was played on the video board at the last home football game of the season. The association also holds meetings with student leaders, campus organizations, and fraternities and sororities, as well as organizing public speakers on the topic.

The biggest challenge of the campaign is to reach one of the most massive fan bases in college sports. "We just try to saturate every place we can with our slogan," Boon says. "It's also a matter of being consistent with our message. I would like for it to become a common brand that people who come to Texas expect to see—and that everyone respects its meaning."

BOUNCING BACK

Sometimes, it's a whole community—coaches, athletes, parents, and fans—that has to re-examine its sportsmanship policies. A Nov. 2, 2007 football game left an ugly cloud hanging over Half Moon Bay (Calif.) High School. Accusations surfaced that during a Half Moon Bay home game, players launched racial and homophobic slurs towards players from Sequoia High School in nearby Redwood City, Calif., and that four fans stormed the field and threw eggs at Sequoia fans and cheerleaders.

"When those accusations were made, they immediately took on a life of their own," says Matt Ballard, Half Moon Bay's Head Football Coach and Athletic Director. "A lot of media around here were saying, 'Half Moon Bay is a den of bigots and violent people.' It really put a black eye on the school and community."

But from that negative press came a lot of good. Half Moon Bay decided to take a harsh look at its sportsmanship policies and how it could turn things around.

To start, the athletic department revamped its code of conduct to make it more specific. It now includes a no-tolerance policy in which athletes are suspended for one year for unsportsmanlike behavior, ranging from athletes' conduct during games to drug and alcohol use at school events. All athletes and their parents must sign the policy in order to participate.

"We had to spell out what is not okay," Ballard says. "People think that it goes without saying that certain actions are wrong, but that's not necessarily true. Our new code of conduct states that there are certain ways you are expected to act as an athlete here, or the privilege is lost."

The high school also added a \$90,000 staircase and visiting bleachers for up to 300 spectators to the football stadium. This allows separate stands for home and away fans, decongesting an area previously ripe for conflict.

More supervisors are now present at all home games and they wear black and orange jackets so they are easily identifiable. The school is using public service announcements at games to encourage sportsmanship and instruct fans on what are not acceptable cheers. A cut-off time for student entry to games was also instituted and re-entry is not allowed.

Before going forward with the new policies, Ballard made sure to get community input. "Without our parents on board, athletics don't exist here," he says. "So the ability to

talk about the new policies with parents helps us enforce it."

All the efforts have proven worthwhile, as the school had an incident-free football season this fall. "What we implemented was not a drastic change," Ballard says. "The Sequoia incident blew up to more than what it was. But instead of getting defensive, we asked, 'How can we use this to take a look at ourselves, move forward, and make this a better school?' I think it turned into something positive that any athletic program can learn from." ■

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