

Sideline Violence at Youth Sports Events

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Sideline Violence 2

We are in the midst of an explosion of sporting opportunities for the youth of America. Never before have there been so many activities available for our youngest players, with some competitive sports available as early as age five. Because these types of opportunities did not exist when most of today's adults were kids, many parents are living vicariously through their children. In the author's personal experience as a youth soccer coach, there is entirely too much emphasis placed on winning and not enough on player development and sportsmanship. Parents and spectators equate losing with failure and some parents expect entirely too much from their own kids.

While the children themselves seem to be content just to play and do their best, spectators and parents sometimes behave poorly, creating an environment that is hostile and tense. If allowed to intensify, this hostility, as well as the inevitable and inappropriate spectator behavior to follow, sends a horrible message to our impressionable youth players. In extreme cases, this unsporting spectator behavior leads to sideline violence. One of the ways this can be circumvented is to remove from the premises any spectator who displays unsportsmanlike behavior at a youth sports event. While this may sound like an extreme measure, the potential consequences of inaction provide the

necessary justification for taking such a precaution.

An informal poll taken a few weeks ago on the sidelines of a girls' soccer game involving 11-year-olds suggests that some people feel there is no evidence to support addressing this alleged problem with such drastic measures. These spectators contended that the media hype surrounding one or two blatant incidents have sensationalized the topic and blown it out of proportion. Findings compiled by the National Association of Sports Officials tend to dispute that argument and at least provide a glimpse of hard evidence to the contrary. Phillips (2007) stated "The NASO website features a 10-page, 84-incident listing of attacks, including a Kentucky father who was jailed in 2003 for an altercation with an umpire at a T-ball game involving 5-year-old and 6-year-olds" (p.1).

How did we go from watching Susie score a goal to running across the field and punching the referee in the face? The answer is embedded in a fundamental lack of knowledge and respect. If you have ever attended a youth sporting event, then I'm sure you've heard parents chastise their kids about poor play and make remarks about other players. Parents "coach" from the sidelines and scream instructions at the kids, which only

serves to confuse the players even more. Parents are constantly yelling at the referees, game officials and opposing coaches, sometimes using profanity. Spectators are often incorrectly upset because they do not fully understand all the rules. Most of these situations are a direct result of a lack of respect for authority.

Aside from the obvious implications of a spectator attacking an opposing team parent or other individual, one cannot ignore the impact this type of behavior can have on the game itself. Once the children see and hear the adults become aggressive and unruly, the stakes are raised. This poor parental behavior only reinforces the notion that winning at all costs is the only acceptable result. The play on the field becomes more violent as the players themselves become emotional and more aggressive. Players may become tempted to intentionally injure a top player from the opposing team that cannot be defended using traditional methods. Unethical coaches may encourage this behavior without actually verbalizing this inappropriate message. Ultimately, the tense environment of the game itself begins to escalate and spiral out of control. Protective parents lash out when their child gets hurt, intentional or otherwise.

Spectators and parents yell and scream at each other on the sidelines. Left unchecked, this recipe for disaster will surely result in yet another ugly scenario that we will read about. Collectively, the sports community will shake their heads in amazement and wonder how this can continue to happen. One reason is that currently our society quietly condones this type of behavior by not providing a reasonable penalty or consequence. Many of the aforementioned activities would be taboo, except for the fact that they are occurring on or near the battlefield we call a youth sporting event.

Once the game is over, the parents, players, coaches and spectators from the losing team are generally unhappy. All too often, a conscious effort is made to rationalize the loss by looking for a scapegoat or injustice to blame. According to Phillips (2007) "Dr. Larry Lauer of the Institute for the Study of Youth Sports at Michigan State says many adults come to believe their success as parents is measured by the accomplishments and setbacks of their children" (p.1). While the youth players themselves may admit they had a bad game, the parents seem unable or unwilling to recognize this, and invariably will blame everyone else for their child's poor play. This inability to recognize the team's or individual player's

deficiencies and accept responsibility for the defeat, is the root cause of much of the rage at youth sporting events. The young players observe this unpunished, improper behavior, grow up to be adults themselves, and the cycle is then perpetuated. This is why removing the offender from the premises is an essential element of changing adult behavior for the future.

One of the reasons this expulsion will work is that it relies on the premise of causing shame. The perceived shame that the parent or spectator was trying to avoid in the first place, will now be visited upon them. Instead of being ashamed for acknowledging their child's poor play, they now must endure the shame of being asked to leave a sporting event due to their own poor behavior. The referee, or other official in charge, would make the request and notify the coach of the offending team that compliance is mandatory. In the event the offender resists the order to leave and fails to comply with the request of the officials, the offending team forfeits the match. Once again, shame would be visited upon the adult, but this time the entire team would suffer the ultimate penalty, defeat. You can be sure that would be the first and last time a parent would be allowed to determine the outcome of a game. In future, the parents and spectators would police themselves so a scenario like this would

not be repeated.

Quite a few methods have been tried in the past 10 years, apparently having little or no effect of solving the problem. These range from something as innocent as not bothering to keep score, right up to a zero-tolerance policy that actually punishes the child instead of the adult. "Some organizations have implemented and enforce a policy of zero-tolerance towards obnoxious adults. If the parents fail to control themselves, the child is suspended from play. If it occurs a second time, the child is removed from the team". (Docheff & Conn, 2004, p.62). While this method seems relatively effective, it unfairly punishes the child for actions of the adults. As a society, we have the responsibility to make sure our impressionable youth are able to compete in a fun and safe environment. This almost barbaric behavior at youth sporting events is a relatively recent phenomenon that if left unchecked will tear at the fiber of society for many years to come. It is time to remove the rose colored glasses and admit we have a problem. This particular solution will require a series of rule changes which will need to be instituted by the various youth sporting organizations. Currently, there is no forfeiture rule, to the author's knowledge, that is based solely on spectator behavior. The

closest we come to that is during a soccer match, when a coach can receive a yellow or red card for the behavior of the spectators on his or her sideline. The only fair punishment can be one where the kids do not suffer for the sins of the adults, and the offenders themselves are shunned by those who simply want to enjoy the game. This epidemic of inappropriate behavior must cease immediately. These youthful athletes need to grow up in an atmosphere of family values and respect for authority. The future of our children depends on what we do next. Our continued failures will certainly become a heavy burden to bear, both on our collective consciences and the next generation. Losing this battle is clearly not an option.

References

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