



Sportsmanship in Life... Perspective from the Bleachers

Over the last 15 years, I have seen a definite decline in sportsmanship concerning youth sports. As professionals working in public recreation administration, my colleagues and I strive to remedy this issue on a daily basis. We share stories, analyze trends, create policies, and even enforce penalties to those who choose to not adhere to reasonable standards. And the challenges seem to intensify day by day.

Webster's dictionary defines sportsmanship as fair play, respect for opponents, and polite behavior by someone who is competing in a sport or other competition. It defines ethics as rules of behavior based on ideas about what is morally good and bad. While the two definitions are not identical, they seem to have some common threads that make me wonder if the decline in both is somehow related.

I wonder how closely the lessons we are teaching in youth sports may affect the business climate of tomorrow. How do these lessons affect the moral landscape of society? Ultimately youth sports should provide socialization, encourage a healthy and active lifestyle, build discipline, and most importantly be fun. Although these sentiments often don't align with the youth sports culture of today, they *should* be the true and ultimate focus.

Conversely, what type of lessons do the negative experiences teach? How far do they reach in life? In our modern-day youth sports culture, we throw equipment when we lose, we publicly insult our friends and other community members when the experience doesn't match our expectations, we use children as pawns for our own personal gains, and worst of all, we cheat our children out of good experiences. Is it ok to "game" the system for the sake of winning? Is insulting our friends and neighbors through social media justifiable if it seems to improve our lot in life? Did the official cheat me out of a victory, or did I not score enough points to defeat my opponent? Does stealing your colleague's work become "gamesmanship," or is it just plain dishonest? Does storytelling about your competitor build your client list, or is it unethical and inappropriate?

Ultimately these become issues that we as adults need to address, one incident at a time. Setting high standards and holding ourselves accountable become the conduit for change. Seemingly simple acts have the power to change the culture of our community and world. One single act of honesty or kindness can become contagious. As a community we need to pay it forward...on the field as well as in the conference room. One of the many rewards from this approach will be seeing our children display the same behaviors. That transformation can extend far beyond the field and improve the culture of society.

Remember to take a step back and focus on what youth sports is all about...learning life lessons through a team activity, winning with humility and losing graciously. It's about the value of hard work, friendship and being a good teammate. Life is imperfect, just like sports, and losing the game doesn't mean that we have failed.