

Respect: The Missing Word in Sports

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- € NBA players physically abusing officials
- € NFL players penalized for taunting their opponents.
- € NCAA bans on end zone celebrations.
- € Scholastic sports rules about taunting or intentionally distracting opponents and players with inappropriate “body markings.”
- € Junior high volleyball teams with shirts exclaiming, “We work ours off so we can kick yours!”
- € Point guards refusing to pass the basketball to certain teammates.
- € Wrestlers locked in windowless rooms so they can’t eat.
- € Youth football players given diuretics by their coach so they can lose enough water weight to make league size limits.
- € T-ball players making derogatory comments about how their opponents throw the ball.
- € Male youth baseball players refusing to talk to the one or two girls on the team.
- € Parents confronting coaches about playing time in basketball games involving 8 and 9 year olds.

Such events are the stuff of everything from media stories to neighborhood gossip, and even a casual observer of sports can add to the list. In each, one clearly senses that something is wrong, but what is the common thread? More importantly, how can a coach create an environment likely to foster more appropriate behaviors? While there may be no simple answer to these difficult questions, RESPECT - or rather the lack of it - seems to be an element in each case.

The process begins with each athlete being confident about their own ability and realistic in assessing their performance. The coach aids in this by giving players the opportunity to practice the skills they already have, learn new ones and perform within the context of the game. The coach then assists the athletes in evaluating their performance individually. The emphasis is on making the best effort and accepting the outcome whatever it may be. Although the coach may need to push certain players to perform outside their individual “comfort zone,” both coach and athlete develop a sense of what can be accomplished, and they have a plan for achieving it. These in turn lead to players having respect for themselves and their ability. They know they are prepared, for they have worked hard on skills and strategies and they know the rules; they stand ready to make their best effort. They will play with confidence and skill without resorting to “trash-talking” or taunts.

While helping players learn about their own talents, the good coach also strives to make them realize that everyone on the team is in the same situation. Ability may differ among people but effort does not; athletes should be striving to do their best, and therefore, they are to be respected. Teammates are encouraged to do their best, and good effort should be applauded. They are not criticized for supposed weaknesses or poor performance but rather are challenged to work hard at practice.

Much the same thinking applies to opponents. The coach hoping to create a positive environment should avoid not refer to the other team in derogatory terms. Rather the coach should encourage players to view opponents as simply a group of athletes who are working toward the same goals while wearing a different colored shirt and playing for another coach. As such, opponents should be given the same courtesy and respect as teammates.

Similarly, the officials and rules should be seen as what they are: essentially neutral interpreters of guidelines for fair and safe play. In this context, both are important elements of the game. They are neither people to intimidated and brow-beaten or arbitrary barriers to be overcome.

The people watching the event, whether a group of parents or a crowd of paid spectators, represent another element of sport. Rather than demonizing or inciting them, both coach and athletes should work to humanize on-lookers. These people should be seen as simply a group of individuals coming together to enjoy the competition. As such, they are an essential part of the game. They provide encouragement and feedback; they share in the success and failures of the athletes.

Finally, we have the game. Each sport has an essential character about, one which reflects some qualities of being human. Eye-hand coordination, making decisions under stress, being competitive, testing one's limits these things happen in athletics. The players must respect the games for what they are: tests of our "humanness." The coach primarily concerned with the quality of the players experiences will talk in these terms with athletes. Not only does this help players keep the game in perspective, it also allows them to truly enjoy it. After all, "sport" is a synonym for fun and enjoyment.

There are those who will say that these views are unrealistic, that they represent an out-moded view of athletics, or that they are impractical. But I would respond that the excesses mentioned at the beginning of the article suggest that something is desperately wrong with the world of sports. When parents cannot walk away from a youth basketball game feeling good about how the children played, when athletes drop out of sports because they are no longer fun, when poor sportsmanship is taken for granted, something needs to change.

Change must Come from the bottom up. That is where the youth sports coach works and can make a difference, for if we are to make sports fun and enjoyable for all, we must work with the young people. They need the opportunity to develop their skills in a positive environment that encourages respect for all aspects of the game, beginning with themselves and their abilities. The coach who fosters such feelings will do much to address the long-term problems associated with sport.