

Maintaining a Positive Culture

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by Neil Phillips

The excitement of competition, viewing athletic prowess and witnessing the display of admirable character traits are all elements that draw us to the sports environment.

When it comes to youth sports, we can add to these the joy we get from watching others play and coach their way toward excellence. Feeling personally tied to what takes place on the field strengthens our attraction and connection to sports in general, and to youth sports specifically. Fortunately, the majority of our experiences as fans at youth sports events are favorable. We usually leave the field feeling entertained by the efforts and virtues of the young athletes before us, and we anticipate the next opportunity to be a supportive family member or friend. However, we too often witness poor behavior by adults in the youth sports arena - conduct on the part of fans, parents and coaches that taints our experience and threatens the environment that can and should serve as a haven for all participants.

As evidence of this, think of the last time you attended a skating event or hockey game and thought to yourself, I wish that guy would be quiet or She must be embarrassing her child or I can't believe she said that. Somewhere along the line, conduct that is deemed unacceptable in all other social contexts has become tolerated and, thus, encouraged, in the youth sports world. Ironically, for every individual who is exhibiting poor behavior, there are probably 10 people standing nearby who find the conduct deplorable. What's troubling is that, for some reason, the overwhelming majority does little or nothing to put an end to it. This tolerance is what allows bad behavior to exist and thrive. Without question, this is a disturbingly visible sign of an eroding youth sports culture.

PCA believes the most practical definition of "culture" is "the way we do things here." In other words, what types of behavior will our environment demand; what will it tolerate? What can we do as parents, coaches, rink managers or program administrators to maintain a positive culture in youth sports, one that creates an environment where young athletes can experience all of the benefits that sports has to offer? To start, there are two important steps:

1. Be proactive. Recognize that a positive culture doesn't just happen. Stakeholders, especially in leadership positions, must collectively decide what type of environment is most suitable to meet the over-riding goals of the rink, league, program and community. Ask and thoroughly answer the question: What do we want our program to stand for?
2. Spread the word. Once the elements of the desired culture have been determined, it is imperative that it be communicated clearly to all members of the community. This communication should take many forms: mission statements, training programs for coaches and parents, codes of conduct, buttons, banners, flyers, etc.

Taking these steps will get any organization off to a good start. However, we can't stop here. The major question is: What do we do when, despite our best efforts to prevent poor behavior in our environment, instances of negative conduct still arise?

1. Recognize the need for action. The integrity of a positive culture is far too important to let a few individuals put it in jeopardy. Though very few of us enjoy confrontation, we must prepare ourselves to take appropriate, non-confrontational action when necessary.

2. Recruit allies. Most often, we are not alone when we feel bothered or offended by conduct around us. Communicate with other fans, league administrators and team parents to build a consensus that something needs to be done. Collectively, a clear message can be sent regarding appropriate behavior.

3. Rely on stated consequences. To be useful and effective, codes of conduct must clearly and explicitly state the consequences that will follow unacceptable behavior. In addition, there must be a pre-determined process through which all reported incidents will be handled. Enforcement is a critical component of any meaningful code of conduct.

4. Prepare in advance. It's much easier for us to respond to a situation if we've prepared for it. We should think, ahead of time, how we might intervene if the need arises. Play out hypothetical scenarios in your head, reflect on effective interventions that you've witnessed, and think about past instances and how you might have handled them differently.

None of this is easy. The aversion most of us feel toward confronting one another is most often a healthy one. We are wise to avoid engaging others when the likely result will be further antagonism and belligerence. However, there is a tremendous challenge facing all of us who cherish the youth sports environment as an arena that is an immeasurably valuable component of the education of our children. Is this playing environment important enough to defend? Can we summon the moral courage it takes to uphold a positive culture in youth sports? Can we demand that the majority refuse to tolerate the negative behavior of a few? The answer must be "YES, YES, YES."

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