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Message Bombardment Shapes Behavior

EDGE - Jan/Feb 2004

Remind coaches and spectators to "Honor the Game" for a more positive youth sports culture.

by Tina Syer

After presenting a Positive Coaching Alliance (PCA) workshop to a group of youth coaches, I headed out to watch a collegiate field hockey game. Early in the game, one of the parents on the sidelines decided that the officiating was not up to par and began to loudly berate the officials. With the words from the recent workshop ringing in my ears, I felt I had to do something.

Looking down at my shirt, I saw a "We Honor the Game Here!" sticker that I had applied an hour earlier. I walked up to the father, peeled the sticker off my shirt, and asked him if he'd be willing to wear it. He replied, "If I wear this, does it mean I have to shut up?" Then he smiled, laughed, applied the sticker and managed to stay quiet the rest of the game. What impressive power this little sticker had!

Leaders in youth sports carry tremendous power to shape the environments in which athletes participate. You (ice skating and hockey leaders) can use message bombardment to produce a total clarity of cultural norms in your arenas. This bombardment should take multiple forms.

Make sure your organization has a clear mission statement that is written down and articulated to your coaches, athletes, judges, referees, parents and fans. This mission statement describes the type of culture you expect in your arena. Many organizations have a mission statement, but no one ever sees it. So dig out your mission statement, or create one (see the "Leaders" section on the PCA Web site for help), and distribute it widely. Include it in materials sent home to coaches, parents and skaters. Post it on the doors entering the arena, on locker-room walls, next to the snack area and on the walls where spectators sit. If you have a Web site, the mission statement should be front and center.

Stickers, buttons and handouts that echo messages from your mission statement should be distributed in the stands. PCA's Web site offers "Honor the Game" buttons and stickers. Banners can also be created to hang on arena walls. All of these written forms of message bombardment give you a good initial base.

Another crucial part of message bombardment includes the creation of a "Parent Pledge" and a "Coach Expectations" sheet. These two documents give you the opportunity to share with parents and coaches exactly what you expect from them. These documents should be a list of what you do want to see from your coaches and parents, rather than a list of "don'ts."

Use every chance you have to verbally reinforce your desired culture. Before competitions and games, take the microphone and remind spectators: "In this arena we Honor the Game. That means cheering on good performance and respecting the judges/referees. Please take a moment to become familiar with the environment we reinforce here by reading the posted mission statement. We need and appreciate your help in maintaining this healthy environment for our athletes."

How does all of this message bombardment help you? First of all, it works as preventive medicine. When a parent gets upset over a call and wants to open her mouth to yell at the judge/referee, she thinks twice as she looks down at the sticker she is wearing that reads "Honor the Game" and sees a banner hanging across the arena with the same message.

Of course, with as much message bombardment as you can muster, there will still be ugly occurrences every now and then that you, as leaders, need to address. When you see a parent yelling

at a referee, it's a lot easier to summon the moral courage to approach that parent knowing you have built a solid foundation of Honoring the Game from the start. This parent cannot possibly tell you that he did not know what sort of conduct is expected in the arena. It's posted everywhere! The same holds true when you have to have a tough discussion with a coach. If you have to talk with a coach about changing his or her conduct with athletes or referees, it really helps to have an Expectations Sheet (which he or she has already read and signed) to refer to.

Expecting parents, coaches and athletes to know what type of culture you want to create in your arena without communicating it to them is not fair. We all come to the arena from different backgrounds in which cultural norms vary widely. The use of message bombardment gets everyone on the same page and shapes behavior, so athletes in your arena can have the best possible experience, which will keep them coming back year after year.

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