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Zero Tolerance for Rink Rage

by Dianne Powell

We've all heard of road rage and more recently airline rage, but in July sports rage sounded a clarion call for the ice skating industry. In July, we were shocked and appalled to learn that one hockey dad had pummeled another to death in a dispute over a pick-up hockey game in a rink in Massachusetts. And admittedly or not, all uninvolved rink owners and managers were grateful it didn't happen in their rink but painfully aware that it could have. As Jay Wescott, chair of ISI's Hockey Section and General Manager of East Bay Iceland, Inc. with three ice rinks in California said, "Any of us could have been in this situation. We have to learn from what has happened."

Lessons to Learn

What is to be learned from this most tragic incidence and other recent incidences of sports-related violence?

"Parents need to realize that it is their children's sport, not their sport. The parents are not the ones competing, and it's important that they set examples for the kids," says ISI District 13 representative Janice Forbes from Harry Sprinker Recreation Complex in Tacoma, Washington.

Michael Josephson, an attorney and founder of the Josephson Institute of Ethics and the Character Counts Coalition, warns, "Hockey is a high risk sport in terms of potential violence. To allow it to be played by young kids without the supervision of coaches and/or security or both is dangerous and possibly imprudent."

Gerry Hart, ISI Board 2 nd Vice President, owner of The Rinx in Hauppauge, New York, and a15-year NHL veteran says, "This is not an isolated incident. This is something that has been escalating for years. It comes from a very relaxed tolerance for misconduct by coaches, players and parents. We have to come to a policy for zero tolerance for violence within our recreational facilities."

Forbes says facilities cannot allow aggressive or violent behavior. "Very harsh reprimands should be put on parents and children, even coaches, whoever is guilty," says Forbes.

"We, managers and owners, need to take an active role. There's supposed to be a zero tolerance rule," says Wescott. "We, as an industry, have to make sure we enforce the policies that are in place. In order for the kids to feel safe and the parents to feel they are safe and secure, we really have to take the steps to become more involved."

"I think we've got to step up to the plate and enforce zero tolerance for violent, abusive conduct by parents, coaches and players," said Hart. "Facility staff have the right to eject unruly spectators or facility users." At The Rinx, unruly patrons are issued a warning and staff members try to educate people in a subtle, unembarrassing way as to what expectations for behavior are. "If they can't live up to those expectations, we ask them to leave," says Hart.

Fred Engh, President and Founder of the National Alliance for Youth Sports,

says that while the death from the violence in Massachusetts was a rare occurrence, violence at

sports venues is a growing problem. “This violence that has erupted in children’s sports isn’t rare,” says Engh. “It’s something that we as professionals, we who are in charge of children’s sports, must finally take a major step or else it’s going to continue, and we will see more and more violence.”

Possible Solutions

The National Alliance for Youth Sports (NAYS) has 2,200 chapters and 150,000 members who are coaches, parents and administrators. The group offers 20 to 30 hours of training that leads to certification as a Youth Sports Administrator – training that Engh sees as critical to stopping violence in sports facilities.

Engh says that NAYS’ National Academy for Youth Sports Administration trains people to “understand children’s sports from the perspective of how children develop, safety issues, how children mature at different rates, and all the things that can insure that children’s sports are positive, safe and wholesome. If rinks are going to lease their facilities to private interest groups, then they have to take this responsibility seriously by hiring or having on staff a person who is trained in youth sports administration to be the superintendent/supervisor/overseer of children’s ice hockey, children’s ice events.”

Engh’s program also offers training for coaches through their National Youth Sports Coaches Association and for parents through their Parents Association for Youth Sports National Sportsmanship and Ethics training. Parents are asked to sign and live up to a code of ethics which emphasizes the safety and well-being of children in sports.

Forbes says she would like to see a no tolerance (for violence or abusive behavior) policy in facilities and calls for a civility clause in contracts. The civility clause would state that “people have to behave in a civil manner when they’re in your facility or they’ll be asked to leave, that’s parents and children and workers, everybody,” explains Forbes.

Hart suggests having parents, coaches and players sign a code of conduct contract.

Wescott advocates a closer working relationship between coaches and officials. “It can’t be adversarial any more,” he says. “In the end, it’s all about the kids, all about making the game better. It’s not about the officials; it’s not about the coaches and certainly it’s not about the parents. We need to work together – officials, coaches, rink management and parents leaders – to re-enforce that sportsmanship has to be the utmost, number one priority, and when things start to get too emotional, some people are going to be asked to leave a game or leave the facility.”

Josephson says, “The process of inculcating good values is captured in the acronym TEAM. That means you have to *teach*, you have to *enforce*, you have to *advocate*, and you have to *model* the behaviors you want.”

“We’ve got to teach that violence is simply unacceptable,” says Josephson. “The idea that I was provoked or he started it has got to be understood as unacceptable. We have to teach youngsters that being able to control those passions and emotions is a very important part of personal development. It has to be taught by the parents and by the coaches. Second, you must enforce it. That means we must have some mechanism for controlling the violence.”

“Violence tends to happen spontaneously, and it gets out of hand. There must be adults with cool heads available at sporting events who can prevent this kind of thing from getting out of hand. We have to impose consequences on those who are violent. The earlier we impose the consequences, the less it has to be. A penalty is usually enough with the players, but if it’s not, you have to throw them

out of the game. A warning to a spectator is usually enough, but if it's not, you have to escort him from the rink," continues Josephson.

"It's not enough that you teach and enforce these things," adds Josephson, "we've got to really say the game of hockey, or the game of any sport where violence can occur, is simply not being played properly when excess violence occurs. Yes, there may be some contact, some hitting, some checking involved, but there has to be some understanding that the athletic skills that the sport is made to measure are being distorted if we allow too much violence. We have to advocate that the true sport is played by finese and skill and ability, not by brute force and intentional injury."

"The final thing we have to do," says Josephson, "is model. Every adult has a special responsibility to exercise an extraordinary amount of self-restraint. Spectators should not be allowed to scream abusive things to umpires. They should not be allowed the 'kill the ref' attitude. We must demand that people model the behaviors we want."

Root Causes

What is contributing to increases in sports-related aggression and violence? "Money," says Forbes. "With sponsorships and the amount of money amateur athletes are paid, some parents put their children in a sport and make demands on them because they see the dollar figure. They see their child earning money. Whatever happened to skating because you love the sport of skating?"

Wescott also cites parental pressure. "There's a lot more intensity for parents to get their kids to the highest level they can," he says. "There's a lot more emphasis on kids getting athletic scholarships. It also could be that the parents are more competitive than the kids are."

"The mind set of today's parents is my child must be number one. My child is going to make professional money. My child is going to replace me, because I'm not going to loose the second time around. I made it to a certain degree, but I never made it as far as I wanted to; therefore because I failed, I'm not going to let my child fail," says Engh.

"I think there is an increase in lack of self-restraint throughout our society," says Josephson. People have always gotten angry, but it was generally understood that a civilized person, a person of character controls that anger. Self-discipline has been a highly respected characteristic, but that's becoming less and less so."

"We have some very major incidents of lack of self-discipline. Whether it's Latrell Sprewell strangling his coach or Mike Tyson biting off the ear of an opponent or our president having inappropriate sexual relations in the White House, we have, unfortunately, an ethos where the need for people to restrain themselves, to discipline themselves seems to be less so," explains Josephson.

Alcohol is another cause of aggressive behavior according to Josephson. "Alcohol is often involved in some of these things, especially with fans," he says. "If alcohol is going to be permitted at an event, you increase dramatically the likelihood of violence, and you increase your responsibility to provide security."

"I don't think children are taught respect," adds Forbes. "In our society everybody is so busy. Parents are busy and usually both parents are working. The way kids in kindergarten talk, you wouldn't expect in junior high, and you get zero support from the parents if you complain."

Role of Coaches

In light of the social environment of today, what should be the role of coaches?

“Coaches are critical when it comes to what behaviors are going to be prevented,” says Josephson. “Every youngster out there wants to play. The coach totally controls that ability. If the coach is willing to say to youngsters when they misbehave they will not play, and if their behavior is chronic enough, they will not be able to stay on the team, they will impact and effect the behavior on the team.”

“Sports are the greatest resource we have in this country to teach children life skills,” says Engh. “We can teach them teamwork; we can teach them ethics; we can teach them sportsmanship; we can teach them how to win and most importantly, the importance of loosing.”

Wescott agrees that sports and coaches teach life lessons. “Whether the sport is hockey, baseball, basketball, softball, it doesn’t matter,” he says. “Sports teach so much about life: getting along in a group, getting along with people, commitment, discipline, coming together for one common goal. I think coaches have to teach that and to teach about consistency, discipline, commitment, fairness. Those are the things that are really important; along the way they can learn the sport.”

“The coach’s job is to be a role model individual in terms of sportsmanship, conduct, competitive spirit and ethics. They probably have more impact on kids at a young age than the parents do,” says Hart.

“Coaches should give students the best possible training and respectful advice in the sport, teach them to be respectful toward other skaters. I’ve always felt it was important for me to not only make my skater a good skater but a good person,” says Forbes.

Conclusion

“We need to take sports back,” says Josephson. “Ice hockey is a wonderful game. It’s a game of phenomenal endurance and skill and conditioning, and we’ve got to give it back to the athletes and the people who love the game, instead of the brutes and ruffians.”

** Editor’s Note: For more information about the National Alliance for Youth Sports and its programs, call 1-800-688-KIDS or check their Web site at www.nays.org. For information on the Josephson Institute of Ethics and the Character Counts program, call 310-306-1868 or check their Web sites: www.josephsoninstitute.org and www.charactercounts.org.*