

PARENTS AND COACHES CAN SAVE GOOD SPORTSMANSHIP FROM EXTINCTION

by Mickey Rathbun

When a superstar athlete misbehaves, his antics make headlines and TV news everywhere—including, most likely, in your house. Your child gets a lesson in sportsmanship, whether you like it or not. And it probably isn't the kind of lesson you like.

What young athlete didn't hear about the incident in which Baltimore Oriole second baseman Roberto Alomar spit at umpire John Hirschbeck after the ump had ejected him from a game? Or about Chicago Bull forward Dennis Rodman kicking a courtside cameraman? Or stories of the day-to-day trash talk and showboating that go on in many NBA games?

Not surprisingly, as bad sportsmanship becomes more prevalent on the pro level, it seems to be more common on junior levels as well. "If the pros get away with trash talking and other bad behavior, who else do [kid athletes] have to emulate?" asks Linda Petlichkoff, a professor of sports psychology at Boise State University.

Two recent examples of this trickle-down trend:

- A high school football player in New Mexico charged into a ref, knocking him unconscious. Why? The ref had ejected the player for unsportsmanlike conduct.
- A Massachusetts hockey league for 10-year-olds banned postgame handshakes because of rough behavior between players during the handshake line.

WINNING IS EVERYTHING

Why can't athletes behave? The prime obstacle, according to sports psychologists, is the win-at-all-cost attitude many parents and coaches—and our culture, in general—instill in kids. Even adults who try to teach kids that "It's how you play the game that matters" are hard-pressed to compete with advertisements that tell youngsters winning is everything. Take the sneaker advertisement that ran during the Atlanta Olympics: "You Don't Win Silver. You Lose Gold."

Good sportsmanship—playing by the rules, respecting opponents and officials, and exalting hard work over outcome—is "one of the most important life lessons," says Judy Dixon, who teaches tennis at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and runs tennis camps for children. "Most of us go through life not being what society calls 'winners.' You need to teach kids that it's okay to lose. Everyone has a place where they excel, and it isn't necessarily sports."

What can parents and coaches do to instill notions of fair play and good sportsmanship in children? Plenty, say sports psychologists. Here's some advice from four experts to whom we spoke.

SOUL-SEARCHING

Parents should start with some "personal introspection," says Karen Partlow, national director of the American Sport Education Program, in Champaign, Illinois. "Ask yourself what you want your child to learn through playing sports . Do you want your child to be rich and famous or a good person?"

Of course, those things aren't mutually exclusive. But if Mom is pushing Junior to win, win, win so that he can get a college scholarship or break into the pro ranks (both extremely unlikely), chances are that some fair-play precepts may get lost along the way.

Partlow suggests parents embrace healthy and attainable goals for their children's participation in sports , such as developing new skills, learning to get along with others, and dealing with the emotions that come with winning and losing. Once you have determined your goals, help your children set attainable goals, such as learning a new play, giving their all in practice and games, and controlling their anger after bad calls or mistakes.

START YOUNG

Experts agree that kids should be taught good sportsmanship as soon as they begin playing in a sports program. This way, being a good sport becomes a natural part of their behavior. "Even when children are toddlers, you can begin to talk about consideration, respect, and fairness," says Dr. Michael Simon, a sports psychology consultant in New York City. "As your kids become older and more observant, ask them to give examples of behavior that reflect these concepts. If they can't, help them think of some." For instance, Simon adds, "when an opponent gets injured during a game, it's a sign of respect and consideration to clap for him when he gets up to leave the game."

BE A GOOD ROLE MODEL

Children model the behavior of adults they admire, and parents are generally No. 1 on that list. So make sure your own sportsmanship is impeccable. Don't just cheer for the home team. Show your appreciation when the opposing team makes a good play. After the game, whether your child's team has won or lost, congratulate the opposing team for playing well, and shake hands with the coach. If a call goes in favor of your child's team but you see the call was wrong, speak up. And never, ever say anything derogatory about a coach or player; kids learn to criticize from adults.

STANDARDS AND CONSEQUENCES

Set clear standards of behavior and enforce them with a system of consequences. "If your child misbehaves and the coach doesn't acknowledge his behavior, talk to the coach in private later," says Alan Goldberg, a sports psychologist in Amherst, Massachusetts. "Let the coach know that your child's behavior on the field is not acceptable."

Regardless of what the coach does, you are ultimately responsible for teaching your child good sportsmanship. After the game, talk to your child about his behavior

and, if appropriate, punish him. If your child is really misbehaving on the field, perhaps you should bench him for a future game.

Dallas Cowboy star quarterback Troy Aikman was once given a not-so-private lecture by his mother after he yelled at his coach during a Little League game. Troy had objected to the coach putting in a player who Troy did not think was very good. "When I yelled at Troy, it definitely made an impression," recalls Charlyn Aikman. "I wanted him to consider the feelings of others. To this day, Troy respects other players, as long as they try their hardest."

IT'S HOW YOU PLAY THE GAME

Experts agree that parents, coaches, and kids should define success as trying your hardest, not by wins and losses. Indeed, "when a young athlete equates his self-worth with winning, it's a losing proposition," says Partlow.

"A parent's reaction to winning or losing is really key," says Dixon. "When your child comes home after a game, don't just ask, 'Did you win?' Instead, ask your child, 'Did you have fun? What did you learn? How did you play? How did the team play? What did you do well? What could you have done better?'"

TEACH YOUR CHILD TO ACCEPT RESPONSIBILITY

When your child loses, don't blame the officiating, the weather, faulty equipment, teammates, or some other factor. Parents should help children "accurately assess their performance, to acknowledge and take responsibility for it," says Partlow. It's also important to acknowledge superior skill in other players.

Of course, there will be times when referees and officials miss a call. Remind your child that the officials are doing the best they can and that missed calls are just part of the game—and of life.

DISCUSS WHAT YOU SEE

When watching sports events with your children, take advantage of the opportunities to discuss what you see. "Whether a player is arguing a bad call, kicking dirt, or simply cursing another player, the parent has a wonderful opportunity to talk about the situation, who is right and wrong, and how the problem could have been resolved without the negative type of behavior," says Simon.

Likewise, there are a lot of good sports out there, so point out examples of good sportsmanship, such as the player who gives a helping hand to an opponent who has fallen down or a player cooling down a teammate who has lost his temper.

UNCONDITIONAL LOVE

Above all, says Partlow, to build good sportsmanship "parents must demonstrate unconditional love for their children, and coaches must demonstrate unconditional respect for their athletes. They should say, 'Regardless of how you played tonight, that doesn't change how I feel about you as my son or daughter or my athlete.'" With proper nurturing by parents and coaches, good sportsmanship can be saved.

ACTIVE WATCHING: Use spectator sports to teach sportsmanship

Whether you're watching a youth soccer game or viewing the world series on TV, you can use what you see to discuss appropriate behavior. Here are some ideas to get started:

- When a player loses his temper, ask your child how the player might have handled his anger differently.
- When a player misses an easy shot or loses a key point, discuss what she does to collect herself and get back into the game mentally.
- If an athlete disagrees with an official's call, see if he lets his anger and disappointment throw off his game. Point out the consequences of moping over a call.
- When a player showboats after scoring, ask your child how she thinks that makes the opponent feel.
- If a player or coach is penalized for arguing with an official or fighting, discuss how the penalty hurts the entire team.
- Note examples of opponents acknowledging one another's good plays.
- At the end of the game or match, watch to see whether the players shake hands and part amicably.

ARE YOU A GOOD SPORT?

A checklist for parents and kids:

- Always play by the rules.
- Don't lose your temper.
- Cheer good plays made by either team.
- Don't talk trash or tease or goad opponents.
- Win or lose, be sure to shake hands with opponents and officials after a game.
- Don't yell at teammates for making a mistake. Never criticize teammates or coaches on the sideline.
- Admit your mistakes instead of making excuses or blaming others.
- Try your hardest on every play, even if your team is losing by a lot.
- Point out incorrect calls when they go in your favor.
- Don't argue with calls that go against you.
- Don't show off.
- Have fun!