

Who Do We Blame For Our Loss?

I am writing this article in response to something I read in the paper from a coach, which I found very disturbing, especially in light of our constant quest to improve sportsmanship among our athletes, students, and fans. This is something I believe every coach, athlete, parent and spectator should consider and take a critical look at how they themselves handle these situations.

It concerns public criticism and blaming of officials for a loss!

I want to start off by saying that I have yet to meet an official that goes out to deliberately make one team or another lose. Keep in mind that most of the calls that officials are asked to make are JUDGMENT CALLS. We, as coaches, also make judgment calls: As to who to play, when to play them, what play to do, etc. These are calls we have to make as coaches based on our best JUDGMENT of the situation, and sometimes they work, and sometimes they don't (in other words, sometimes we are right, and some times we are wrong). It is our call to make, and we do the best we can based on our best professional judgment of the situation. The same is true for the calls made by the professional officials we hire for that purpose.

When we blame officials, or for that matter blame anyone, for our losses, we are degrading the effort of all individuals involved in the contest. Instead of blaming anyone for our losses, we should congratulate our opponents for out-playing us on that day. I feel this approach would be better for our relationship with our opponents, as well as better for our players, our spectators and the program and sport as a whole.

Let our athletes know that they played hard, but, on that particular day, our opponent played a little better. It wasn't luck or someone's fault we lost; it was because they played a good game. It is the very nature of athletics that there is always a winner and a loser. There is no shame in being the loser, especially if you gave your best effort. However, when we blame the officials or anyone in particular for our loss, everyone involved in the contest comes out losers. No one intentionally goes out to try and lose a contest, but everyone tries their best to win it, so the winner should be congratulated, and the loser need not look for anyone to blame, not even himself, for the loss.

It has been my experience in watching contests of all kinds for more than 25 years as a coach, an official, and a spectator, that officials do make bad calls, but the bad calls for and against a team tend to even out throughout the course of a game or season. In that time I have never heard a coach give the official credit for the bad calls that went that coach's way. If we don't give credit for bad calls in our favor, then we should not criticize calls we don't agree with. Keep in mind that if the calls tend to even out, then that means that there must have been some other reason for the loss. That reason for the loss would be that our opponent played better that particular night.

We, as coaches, should not be looking for the negatives in a contest or who to blame for the loss. This only leads to a negative and combative attitude in the players towards that opponent or official. This attitude then is carried over to the parents and fans. When we blame officials for the loss, we are sending the message to our athletes that the only way that opponent can beat us is by cheating. Instead, we should look for the positive things achieved in the contest and work to improve on those things as well as in the areas where we did not perform up to expectations.

I understand the feeling of frustration, as a coach who has watched an athlete work hard to win, when that athlete loses a contest. It is not his fault or your fault or anyone's fault that the loss occurred; the other athlete or team just out-performed our athlete on that day, so give him credit for that effort.

Please keep in mind the challenge of recruiting new officials and the difficulty your athletic director has in getting officials for your contests; it is getting worse every year. One of the reasons for this is the verbal abuse officials receive from fans and players and, in some cases it is physical abuse, which is on the rise. When coaches openly criticize officials, you are only reinforcing and legitimizing this type of behavior from fans.

Officials are on the field, just like boundary lines are on the field, to keep the contest fair for both sides. All the officials I have talked with are involved because they want all the athletes to have as good an experience as possible. If you have a legitimate complaint about an official, there is a process established to file your complaint, voicing it in public is not the way to do it. Remember, it is very hard to argue with a judgment call, you may not agree with it, but there is very little you can do to change it.

I feel that **BLAMING** people for our losses, whether it is officials, players, coaches or spectators, has become a big problem in high school athletics, and it really has no place there. I have offered some ideas in this article, that if we all work together on them and share them with our colleagues we can create a situation in our athletic programs where both sides can feel like winners in a contest, even if we are the team with the lower score on the scoreboard.

—*Al Nelson*

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