

Sportsmanship and Running Up the Score

Are you for good sportsmanship? Absolutely yes.

Should you run up the score when the game is clearly out of hand to embarrass the other team? Absolutely not.

In a vacuum, we think we're going to get close to 100% agreement on this, particularly the first one. The second, though, is the part that is often open to interpretation.

This all goes back to the unwritten rules of baseball. The thresholds for expected behavior are going to differ based on the level of play, competition and so many other factors.

And that's why this becomes so controversial. If you think another team shouldn't take extra bases with a 10-run lead and they do, you're going to be angry. But maybe that other coach thinks the threshold is 15 runs. Or maybe he has so much respect for you that he knows 10 runs isn't enough to assume this game is over.

Due to that difference in perception, you're angry and you accuse that coach of bad sportsmanship and running up the score. According to your definition and interpretation, you may be right — but only in your own eyes.

But it goes deeper than that. While we all agree that good sportsmanship is an imperative lesson in youth sports, does that include telling a team with a big lead to stop trying?

That's where this discussion gets difficult for me. I can't claim to know the right answer. But what's clear is that there are contradictions in what we tell our kids.

On one hand, we tell them to never quit. We tell them to give 100%. We tell them the game is never over. We tell them to remain disciplined and focused.

On the other hand, we tell them that, in a game we deem to be "over" even though the final out hasn't been recorded... ***forget all of that other stuff we've been telling you.***

That's the struggle here. But most fans and coaches seem to agree there is a point when a team is "running up the score."

So, we ask: ***Should a team stop trying when a game gets out of hand? And when is that game out of hand?***

Expected Behavior When the Game is Out of Hand

First, I'm not going to define "out of hand." It really is impossible. I'd like to say that people typically know when that point has been reached, but this obviously isn't the case.

Signs that a game is out of hand include one team that clearly doesn't care anymore and another that is hitting and scoring at will. Maybe one team is out of pitching and can't even throw a strike.

At that point, the coach of the team with the lead will typically start taking out their star players. This is a good opportunity to get the subs some extra work.

It does get a bit hazy after that, but here are a few other behaviors I've seen...

- 1. Go station to station after a hit.** You hit the ball over the outfielder's head? Too bad. You're stopping at first.
- 2. Don't steal or move up on passed balls and wild pitches.** Just stay there.
- 3. If the pitcher is struggling to throw strikes, swing at anything close.** Don't walk. Strikeouts are fine.
- 4. It's getting too easy? Hit from the other side of the plate.** Hope for an out.
- 5. Intentionally give away an out by either standing off of the base or not running to first.**

We'll talk more about these approaches a little bit later. But I have some strong opinions there.

The bottom line is that when this starts happening is up for debate. Is it when there's a 10-run lead? 15? 20? More? Should it ever happen?

It's far from crystal clear.

Age and Level Matter

I've coached and seen my sons play at everything from the rec league, Little League and travel ball levels — starting at age four up until 14. The age and level absolutely matter.

If we're playing rec ball, we're here to have fun and learn the game. It's not typically (and this isn't true all the time) a highly competitive atmosphere. So maybe coaches will see the need to pull back and end an inning or the game entirely.

In Little League, I've seen parents and coaches get angry when a team is stealing bases or moving up on wild pitches and passed balls with a 10-run lead.

In competitive baseball, though? I rarely see this become an issue. But it does.

Part of the problem is that runs scored, runs allowed and run differential could help determine seeding and whether you play tomorrow. So, if you stop trying to score runs or you put in players who allow more runs, that could impact whether you play more games. So, to a point, running up the score is encouraged.

I understand that some will respond that not letting the opposition's dignity is more important than whether your team advances. I understand the sentiment. In and of itself, I agree. But the problem is whether you're actually doing that team a disservice by pulling back (more on that later).

In general, though, the most complaints come from parents and coaches of "competitive teams" that really shouldn't be playing at that level. They're getting beaten badly, and they're tired of getting beaten badly.

It's the coaches of that losing team that may be the biggest problem here. They should be playing against lesser competition to avoid such a situation.

Disparity Between Teams Matters

I've got to admit that I may be the most paranoid coach on the planet. I almost always think the other team can come back. I assume you think the same about us.

Still, there are times when the disparity between the two teams is hugely obvious. One team can't throw strikes, can't make a play in the field and can't hit the ball. The other team can do everything right.

There are times when that becomes obvious. It really is rare, though.

What I see more commonly is that one team **appears** to be much worse on that day. One team finds the hole on every weak hit. The other hits liners right at the defense. More mistakes than usual. The game appears to get out of hand.

But is it? That's the tough question, particularly at the competitive level. If a team never quits and the abilities are closer than the score would suggest, I don't want my players to ever think the game is over.

My Definition of Disrespect

And that takes me here...

One of the foundations of my coaching philosophies is that we never quit. I don't care if we're down 15-0. Keep giving your best effort.

I can assure you I've never been angry at another coach for running up the score on my team. What would annoy me, though, is if a team with a big lead stops trying. It basically says that we aren't good enough to come back. We shouldn't even be on the same field together.

I know that's not how we typically look at this, but if our opponents stop trying or they start doing crazy things like hitting from the wrong side of the plate, ***that's the highest form of disrespect.***

Let's say you do stop trying. What if things stop going against us? What if we then win the game? That just seems... ***wrong.***

So that's precisely why we don't want you to quit when you have a big lead against us. We don't want to cheapen our comeback. So, feel free. Run up the score.

On the flip side, we hate the situation of having a huge lead. On one hand, we will certainly give other kids more opportunities to play — this is great. But are we expected to ask my kids to stop trying? To start swinging at terrible pitches? To stop hustling? To stop leading off?

That's the tough part of this. It's important to practice good sportsmanship. But we're also here to play baseball and get better. If we're going to stop trying, we might as well stop playing.

We understand, of course, that if our opponents lay off the gas, the attempt is good sportsmanship. But we don't interpret it that way.

We came here to play baseball. We signed up for competitive baseball. If we get our butts kicked, that's a good life lesson for my kids. And if you kick our butts, it could be a good life lesson for yours in how they handle it.

But just know that we don't expect you to stop playing.

Here is a scenario. A team wins their league and state tournaments before winning their first game of the regional tournament. They lose the next game before running into a team from Texas/California/Arizona, etc.

We started out with a 3-0 lead, the game got away from us quickly. They scored nine runs in the bottom of the first before getting an out.

Eventually, with the score 21-5 and a runner on third in the final inning, they intentionally gave us an out. The runner walked off third, asking us to tag him.

We understand the sentiment. We are not mad at them because we know their hearts were in the right place. ***But don't do that.***

That out was an invitation to help us quit, and we don't like it.

The Easy Solutions

There are several easy solutions here. The first is that instead of this being an unwritten rule, ***put something in writing.***

If your league wants to enforce a protocol with a 10-run lead, make a rule for it. Put it in the rule book that if you lead by 10 runs or

more you can no longer move beyond first base on a hit. You can no longer steal bases or move up on wild pitches and passed balls.

Better yet, put a rule in that the game is over — no matter the inning — with a 10-run lead. I know that sounds ridiculous, but if you believe that the team with a 10-run lead should stop trying, maybe you should just end the game?

The main point here is that this removes the ambiguity. ***Everyone plays by the same rules and expectations.***

In tournament baseball, there are rules in place. Typically, there are run rules of 10 after four, 15 after three and even 20 after two. That, in our opinion, makes this discussion easier.

But maybe you don't have those rules. Or maybe you think that your game is over without hitting those thresholds. There is another solution.

If you think your game has reached a point of no return — the game has already been decided before the final out — ***then quit.***

Call a meeting with the opposing manager and umpires. Let them know that this is doing more harm than good. Call the game.

You could always just play a scrimmage from there. If you've quit and your kids have quit, then just end the game.

Otherwise, you haven't quit. You've signaled that you are still giving your best and want to play.

If you've given up without officially quitting, you are putting the other coach into that very subjective spotlight. You're expecting him to tell his kids to stop trying at an unwritten point in the game.

And that's not particularly fair.

Don't Assume the Worst

Let me reiterate: ***Unwritten rules cause the most dissension because they are unwritten.*** That shouldn't surprise anyone.

Instead of assuming bad sportsmanship when a team doesn't stop trying with a big lead, attempt to look at it differently: Maybe they respect your team so much that they know you haven't quit and can come back.

Regardless, let's stop assuming the worst in people. We can encourage good sportsmanship without expecting our kids to quit.

Now, there are certainly some more unwritten protocols teams should follow with a big lead, even if they shouldn't quit. If we have the big lead, I'll encourage my team to limit the celebrations and just go out and play.

I know that many will respond that pulling back is a good life lesson for the team with the lead, but I look at it differently. The final score isn't ultimately what determines good sportsmanship.

Bottom line is this: ***If your team is trailing, have you given up? Have you stopped trying to score runs? If not, the opposition shouldn't be expected to stop trying either.***