

Good Sportsmanship is Losing Out to Winning

By: Bill Walton

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As a father of four sons who have all been heavily involved with athletics, I was disturbed by a recent survey conducted by the Citizenship Thru Sports Alliance, a national coalition of sports organizations that includes the NCAA and 3 of the 4 major professional leagues. The survey found that parents and Coaches have lost site of children's best interests, and placed excessive emphasis on winning instead of sportsmanship, character development and plain old fun.

With many winter youth sports leagues starting to gear up, this is a good time to re-assess the value of sports for children.

During my playing days, when my children were around some of the greatest athletes in the world, my teammates and I always tried to keep things light. However, it was inevitable that the children were going to witness some of the darker sides of athletics: an argument between teammates, a tongue lashing from the Coach or even a minor scuffle.

When they were old enough to start reading about their Dad in the newspapers, they were crudely introduced to the ugly side of sports, where fun and games take a back seat to money, politics and media bashing.

This is why I always made an extra effort to teach them that sports at their age was not about winning, but it was about sportsmanship, teamwork, attitude and respect. Children already have enough peer pressure and competition. For them to witness negativity or antagonism on a recreational level is unfair and unhealthy.

Young people need to be fundamentals of the game, safety tips and the importance of qualities such as confidence, hustle and dedication. They also need to learn how to win and lose with class and dignity, plus how to compete as true sportsmen at every level of competition.

As a one-time player now a parent, I'm well aware of how incidents, such as 2004's ugly brawl between the Indiana Pacers and Detroit Pistons can significantly affect young people's behaviors and participation of adult role models. Commissioner David Stern and the NBA were right to come down hard on the Pacer's Ron Artest and the other players for their deplorable behavior. It was critical to show all fans, even more so highly impressionable youngsters, that such belligerent antics will never be tolerated, and there will always be severe consequences if you let your emotions get the best of you.

In our own family, our children were always competitive, just like their old man, and of course they had incidents when they reacted foolishly to a bad call against them, just like their old man. Everyone likes to win at sports at every level, so things like that are going to happen. It's part of growing up. What's important is what they learn from their mistakes. Specifically that such behavior ruins the experience for everyone else.

The effort of playing to win is important. But it is imperative to appreciate all that competitive athletics has to offer outside of the thrill of victory. Young people need to see the big picture, and I truly believe that's one of the things that will make them successful later in life not only as athletes but also more importantly as people.