



"O.K., big cheer here, but nothing that might be construed as pressure. Quiet now, but a supportive quiet. Watch your body language."

How to be a good spectator

By John Ritchie, PhD, Superintendent of Schools, Lincoln-Sudbury

Excerpts from an article printed in the Sudbury Town Crier, April 10, 2003

Many years ago, my then 10-year-old daughter performed a great service for me, embarrassing and awkward at the same time, but salutary and lasting in its effect. She was something of a wunderkind athlete (but then, all of our children are), and I was standing on the sidelines of a soccer game with other parents exhorting the team on to victory. "Come on, come on, beat her, okay, pass it, now, all right, shoot!"

The game progressed in a somewhat random fashion, the kids continued running around passing and shooting and I continued what I thought was meaningful encouragement. At some point in the third quarter, as my daughter dribbled up the sideline, right past where I was standing, I gave her a full dose of parental support. Suddenly she stopped dead in her tracks and faced me and said, "Will you shut up?"

I will save for another day me description of what it feels like to be publicly humiliated in front of twenty six 10-year-olds, their parent, assorted volunteer coaches, the nice lady who brought the oranges, the teenaged referee, and the guy who was just out walking his dog.

Instead I will tell you that in the seasons that followed, I watched both my kids play all manner of youth sports, then proceed to varsity teams at the high school level. I left work early and came home late to see games. I sat in gyms and on fields in towns I'd never hear of. I bonded with parents I have not seen since. I hugged perfect strangers in moments of sudden excitement and joy. But I never opened my mouth again, except occasionally to emit a neutral shout of generalized encouragement, and only when my kid was nowhere near the ball.

I admit there was a lot of inappropriate screaming going on inside my own head - "Why the hell didn't you shoot it? You were wide open, God, we've gone over that!"). This was partly because I had developed a phobia about being humiliated in public (which strangely I carry to this day), but mostly because I had an epiphany that morning that led to a conscious decision simply to keep my trap shut at games forevermore. The epiphany was that kids in a game don't want to hear us saying anything specific or personal while they play, don't and shouldn't follow our shouted instructions and don't care about our opinions. They just want to play. I also realized that almost all of what we adults shout at games has to do with our own needs, not what kids want or need...

My epiphany hasn't made me feel superior to or more enlightened than the next fan, just more chastened. But it also made me curious about the whole psychic bundle of kids and parents and sports, what it all means, why it works the way it does. This curiosity has been heightened by the fact that, in my career as a school administrator, difficult complicated and emotionally charged issues involving sports have not only been frequent, but have outnumbered similar challenges involving academics by a 2-1 margin. And it has been piqued further by the occasional dramatic example of parents really going off the rails while watching a game. A few years back, a parent in my town got his boxers so in a twist that he ran onto the field and flattened a kid from the opposing team. And then there's homicide.

To be honest, I haven't figured it all out. Somehow, the athletic field provides a venue maybe the only one, where we can express our deepest emotional investment in our kids in a loud voice. When we watch our kids play, the boundary between what's them and what's us is blurred. We tend to, or are tempted to, indulge our desires for them to perform in front of an audience the feats that we either no longer can do, or never could do. But that's our problem, not theirs.

Think of it this way - every kid on every team in every game is always trying to do his or her best. They may make many mistakes or errors, or get intimidated, or miss the open shot. But they are trying their hardest. Is there any way in which it's helpful to them to hear us yell at them to try harder, think better, run faster? ...

I don't mean to sound like the perfect fan, for it is only through bitter experience that I have been converted basically into a profoundly mute spectator, save for the occasional grunt of pleasure or approval. All I realized was that if a team of kids could speak as one, it would only say one thing to an overly noisy, overly invested, and overwrought audience of adults shouting advice, instruction, and opinion - "Will you shut up?"