

Parents & Sportsmanship

by Dr. Darrell J. Burnett

Parental duties can't be ignored on playing field.

Pick up a sports page and you get a stark picture of the world of competitive sports - corporate sponsorship, fierce competition and a win-at-any-cost mentality. For decades, recreational youth sports have been the beacon of hope for maintaining the purity of sport, where unsportsmanlike conduct has been the rare exception. And yet, even at a level where 20 million youngsters play in leagues throughout the USA, the sign of a decline in sportsmanship are evident: talking trash, challenging officials, refusing to shake hands with the opponent after the game, making excuses after every loss - and that's just the parents!

We reveal our true selves through sports. And like it or not, our kids are watching us ... looking to us as role models of good sportsmanship.

Youth sports are supposedly an avenue to teach values to kids: teamwork, hard work and practice, handling and learning from mistakes, developing confidence and winning and losing gracefully.

Most parents are conscientious about their parenting role. And yet, it constantly amazes me what some parents "reveal" about their character when it comes to their behavior in youth sports. Some examples:

- A team of 8- and 9-year-olds lost a baseball game in the last inning after the right fielder dropped a fly ball. One of the dads on the losing team said, loud enough for the coach and right fielder to hear, "We would have won if the coach would have played that kid in the middle of the game. Everybody knows he can't catch the ball. Why did the coach put him out there with everything on the line?"
- The mother of a girls basketball team that won 51-19 in a tournament for 11- to 12-year-olds, in full earshot of the parents of the losing team, "I guess that team has never seen a real full-court press before. I can't believe their coach didn't teach them how to beat a press. Oh, well, maybe it taught them not to come to this level of a tournament until they're ready!"
- I was doing baseball umpiring on the bases for a game of 10-year-old boys. A small group of parents from the home team was berating a boy at the plate from the visiting team who had gone hitless his first two times at bat. As he came to bat the third time, the parents yelled to their pitcher, "Here's an automatic out! He swings like a girl! He's afraid up there! Blow it by him!" The batter lowered his head. He struck out a third time for the third out. As the pitcher came off the mound, the same group of parents shouted, "If they had more players like that kid, you'd have a no-hitter!"

Why do parents lose it at youth league games? Sports psychologist Thomas Tutko and other feel that parents get too wrapped up in the competition because they are living vicariously through their children. Other experts feel that parents might be filled with unrealistic expectations, hoping their child will be the next superstar. Consequently, they place too much emphasis on making sure their kid "wins" or "has a great game" or "looks good."

Here's hoping we remind ourselves of the significant role we play in the lives of our kids, at their sporting events, and at home.

Parents, Put fun first

Checklist for parents in youth sports -- on and off the field:

1. I maintain a "Fun is No. 1" attitude.
2. I treat officials, coaches, my kids, their teammates and their opponents with respect and avoid ridicule or sarcasm.
3. I praise my kids, their teammates and opponents just for participating, regardless of their athletic skills.
4. I remember to look for positives with my kids, their teammates and their opponents.
5. I remain calm when my kids or their teammates make a mistake and help them learn from their mistakes.
6. I remind my kids and their teammates not to get down on themselves when things don't go well.
7. I try not to take myself too seriously when it comes to my involvement in youth sports, reminding myself that there is life beyond youth sports.
8. I remind myself and my kids to laugh and keep a sense of humor.
9. I emphasize teamwork in team sports with my kids, teaching them to think "we" instead of "me".
10. I teach my kids by giving them a good example of good sportsmanship: winning without gloating and losing without complaining.