Gamesmanship Beliefs of High School Coaches

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Abstract

This study evaluated gamesmanship beliefs of high school coaches from a rural Midwestern state in the United States. Two hundred and fifty-six coaches participated in this study with comparisons drawn by gender, highest level of participation, formal coaching training, years of experience, and officiating experience. Participants completed a 25-statement survey. The survey consisted of 25 gamesmanship statements that asked subjects to indicate if an action was clearly acceptable (1), acceptable (2), unacceptable (3), or clearly unacceptable (4). Chronbach's Alpha measure (a=.938) indicated a high consistency and reliability for the statements on the survey instrument. A crosstabs analysis provided Pearson Chi-Square or Fischer Exact tests to identify statistical significance within the variables. For all of the statements, a majority of respondents identified the statements as either unacceptable or clearly unacceptable. In addition, there were very few significant differences based on gender, highest level of participation, years of coaching experience, formal coaching education, or officiating experience.

Sport participation is an important part of today's society with an estimated 50 million girls and boys participating in organized, non-scholastic youth sport and another seven million involved with school-sponsored sport activity (National Council of Youth Sports, 2008; National Federation of State High School Associations, 2007). The sports that children participate in are numerous with many children participating in two or more sports into their adolescence (Sporting Goods Manufactures Association, 2010; Strand, 2006).

A common problem within sports is that many children and athletes become frustrated with a lack of playing time, an over-emphasis on winning, and poor ethical coaching strategies, resulting in youngsters quitting at a time when they should be having fun playing a game, instead of competing for a championship (Burnett, 2001; Weinberg & Gould, 1999). It is often claimed that coaches tend to lose sight of the fact that they are working with impressionable boys and girls or young men and women and emphasize winning more than other important values (Martens, 2012; Sage & Eitzen, 2013). This is not unique to youth sports, as all levels of athletic participation are plagued by poor sportsmanship and questionable ethical decisions by coaches (Harrison-Dyer, 2011; Vallerand, Deshaies, & Cuerrier, 1977). These questionable decisions can have long-lasting effects on the ethical decision making of future generations (Engh, 2002).

The coaching profession places many demands upon coaches. A majority of athletes think they deserve to play, if not start; parents expect their sons and daughters to be treated with respect; spectators and the media scrutinize coaching decisions via Monday morning quarterbacking; and everyone expects that his or her favorite team will win (Strand & Ohm, 2007). The manner in which coaches act during the course of practices and games may reflect their true character and certainly impacts many others (Clark, 2002). When a coach yells at or challenges game officials, his or her actions are critiqued by athletes, parents, spectators, fans, and the media who are in attendance or participating in the competition. Depending on the perception of an individual, a coach can be viewed as passionate or pathetic, demanding or demeaning. Coaches tend to talk about sportsmanship and fair play, but often, while in the heat of a game, they take the "win at all cost" approach, and pull out all the stops to earn a victory (Garbin, 2010). This "win at all cost" approach is found in youth league sports as well as high school sports (Garber, 2006; Garner, 2013).

Sport scholars have long studied sportsmanship, ethical beliefs, and moral reasoning of athletes and coaches (Beller & Stoll, 1995; Doty, 2006; Hahm, 1989; Kavussanu & Roberts, 2001; Rees, Howell & Miracle, 1990; Rudd & Stoll, 2004; Weiss & Bredemeirer, 1990). Not studied as extensively; however, is the concept of gamesmanship (Howe, 2004). Gamesmanship has been defined as "the art or practice of winning games by questionable means without actually breaking the game's rules, but violating their spirit"; or "the use of ethically dubious methods to gain an objective" (Gamesmanship, n.d).

Acts of gamesmanship are not confined to arguing with officials, opposing players, opposing coaches, and opposing fans. Coaches break, bend, or fail to assist in the application of rules that are implemented to protect the integrity of the game. An example would be an ice hockey coach who sends a player in as the "enforcer" or "goon" to intimidate or protect a teammate. The "brushback" pitch or even "beaning" a player on purpose in baseball is an act that is often viewed as "part of the game", but it is considered deplorable when it happens to a player on one's own team. Designing trick plays that bend the rules or embarrass an opposing team, such as hidden ball tricks, distraction plays, or some plays that purposely deceive the opposing players on a team has long been a part of sports.

A recent, real-life act of gamesmanship played out during an American football game in Manchester, CT (Roberts, 2010). During the first half of a football game a player from Team A lost his list of coded plays from his armband. Apparently the list ended up in the hands of the first year coach from Team B. During the second half the coach of Team B used the list of plays to determine the play calls of Team A. Although this act was not illegal, many would consider it unethical and an act that violates the spirit of the game.

A press release by the Josephson Institute was titled: Report Reveals Propensity of More High School Athletes to Lie and Cheat When the Stakes Are High. A subtitle in the release stated: National Survey Suggests Many Coaches, Especially in Football, Baseball, and Basketball Are "Teaching kids to cheat and cut corners" (Josephson Institute, 2007). This report summarized the responses of 5,275 high school athletes to a written survey administered in 2005 and 2006 and based it's judgment of coaches' behavior on the answers provided by athletes. Specific examples included: 1) 43% of boys thought it was proper for a coach to teach basketball players how to illegally hold and push in ways that are difficult to detect, 2) 40% saw nothing wrong with using a stolen playbook

sent by an anonymous supporter before a big game, and 3) 27% believed it is a proper gamesmanship strategy for a football coach to instruct a groundskeeper to soak the field to slow down the opposing team.

In an attempt to gather information from a coaches' perspective, the general purpose of this study was to investigate the gamesmanship beliefs of high school coaches.

Method

Participants

The participants for this study were 256 high school coaches from a rural Midwestern state in the United States who were members of the state High School Coaches Association (HSCA). The HSCA had an active membership of 921 coaches. The response rate for this study was 27.8%. The study was available to member coaches through a listserv of coaches' e-mail addresses obtained from the HSCA membership data-base.

As shown in Table 1, there were more males (197) than females (59) who elected to complete the survey, with 77% of the respondents being male and 23% female. With respect to years in the coaching profession, the data showed that it was fairly even between percentage of respondents with 1-10 years of experience (93 coaches, 36.5%), 11-20 years of experience (79 coaches, 31.0%), and 20+ years of experience (83 coaches, 32.5%). One hundred and fifty-one of the coaches had experience as officials (62.1%), while 97 had no experience officiating (37.9%). A majority of high school coaches (62.5%) also played collegiate or professional sports, while 37.5% had played high school sports only. Finally, a high percentage, 75.8%, of the coaches, had formal training in coaching.

Table 1. ***Demographic Data***

Variable	n	%
Gender		
Male	197	77.0%
Female	59	23.0%
Highest Level of Sport Participation		
High School	96	37.5%
College	159	62.1%
Professional	1	00.4%
Years of Coaching Experience		
1-10	93	36.5%
11-20	79	31.0%
21+	83	32.5%
Officiating Experience		
Yes	159	62.1%
No	97	37.9%
Formal Coaching Education		
Yes	194	75.8%
No	62	24.2%

Instrumentation

A survey titled "Values, Attitudes, and Behavior in Sport", adapted from the Josephson Institute on Ethics was used to collect the data for this study. The original Josephson survey consisted of two sections: Section I - *What Do You Think?* consisted of 25 statements asking subjects to agree or disagree using a 4-point Likert-scale and Section II - *Sportsmanship and Gamesmanship*, consisted of 25 statements asking subjects to agree or disagree using a 4-point Likert-scale. The researchers obtained permission from the Josephson Institute to use their instrument to collect the data. The survey used in this study consisted of 25 sportsmanship and gamesmanship statements that asked subjects to indicate if an action was clearly acceptable (1), acceptable (2), unacceptable (3), or clearly unacceptable (4). Chronbach's Alpha measure (a=.938) indicated a high consistency and reliability for the statements on the survey instrument.

The survey for this study was validated for content, construct, and face validity by a panel of experts who had experience in conducting survey research and were knowledgeable in the field of sport sociology. In addition, this survey had been used in previous research (Josephson Institute, 2008; Strand & Ziegler, 2010).

Procedure

A list of HSCA coaches' email addresses was obtained from the HSCA. Each coach was e-mailed a consent message web link to access the survey on Survey Monkey. The survey was sent three times in an effort to ensure the greatest response. Permission to use the HSCA listserv was obtained prior to distributing emails.

This study was approved by the University Institutional Review Board (IRB). All subjects were asked to read and acknowledge their willingness to participate on an electronic consent form that was approved by the IRB. All individuals who were surveyed were at least 18 years of age.

Analysis of the Data

Completed surveys were collected via Survey Monkey and converted to an Excel spreadsheet. The data on the spreadsheet were entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (version 19) for analysis. Statistical analysis used to analyze the data included crosstabs to determine percentages and a contingency chi-square test to find statistical differences for gender, highest level of participation, years of coaching experience, formal coaching education, and officiating experience. For further analysis, the responses were combined into two categories: clearly acceptable/acceptable (a.k.a. acceptable) and unacceptable/clearly unacceptable (a.k.a. unacceptable). A crosstabs analysis provided Pearson Chi-Square and Fischer Exact tests to identify statistical significance within the variables.

Results

Table 2 shows the survey statements and the percentage of high school coaches who identified the statement as clearly acceptable/acceptable. Significant differences in identifying the actions as clearly acceptable/acceptable or unacceptable/clearly unacceptable were found within gender for statements 7 (P = 0.047, Fisher's Exact Test, FET), 13 (P = 0.005, FET), 15 (P = 0.017, FET), and 22 (P = 0.035, FET). For statements 7 (A player trash talks the defender after every score by demeaning the defender's skill.) and 22 (To get his team worked up, the coach deliberately swears at an official to get thrown out of the game.) significantly more females

Table 2. ***Percentage of High School Coaches Who Believe the Statement is Clearly Acceptable or Acceptable.***

	Statement	%
1	A coach orders a player to "attack" a pre-existing injury of the top scorer on the other team.	.6%
2	In baseball, a key player for X is hit by a pitch. In retaliation, X's coach orders his pitcher to throw at an opposing hitter.	4.4%
3	In football, a lineman deliberately seeks to inflict pain on an opposing player to intimidate him.	9.6%
4	In football, a coach's team is out of time-outs at a crucial point in a big game. He instructs a player to fake an injury to get a needed time-out.	2.4%
5	A basketball coach teaches players how to illegally hold and push in ways that are difficult to detect.	12.0%
6	In softball, a pitcher deliberately throws at a batter who homered the last time up.	5.6%
7	A player trash talks the defender after every score by demeaning the defender's skill.	2.8%
8	In baseball, a coach instructs the groundskeeper to build up the third base foul line slightly to help keep bunts fair.	15.3%
9	In ice hockey, a coach sends in a player to intimidate opponents and protect his own players.	23.3%
10	In hockey, a player illegally alters a hockey stick in a manner that is undetected.	1.6%
11	After scoring, a player does an elaborate showboat dance in front of the opponent's bench.	0.4%
12	In basketball, player X is fouled. Player Y, the team's best free throw shooter, goes to the line undetected by the ref.	3.6%
13	In football, a coach instructs the groundskeeper to soak the field to slow down an opposing team.	14.5%
14	In soccer, during a penalty kick, a goalie, hoping the referee will not call it, deliberately violates the rules by moving forward three steps past the line before the ball is kicked.	4.8%
15	On the winning point of the game, a volleyball player touches the ball before it goes out, but the referee misses the touch. The player says nothing.	48.8%
16	A coach argues with an official intending to intimidate or influence future calls.	14.5%
17	In tennis, a ball is called out though the player is certain it hit the line. The player says nothing and takes the point.	42.1%
18	In soccer, a player deliberately fakes a foul hoping the best player on the other team will be red carded and removed from the game.	4.0%
19	While on the bench, players boo, taunt and jeer opponents.	0.4%
20	In volleyball, an official makes a mistake in the score. The coach who benefits says nothing.	10.9%
21	Before an important game, a coach receives an anonymous envelope with an authentic playbook of the opponent. The coach used the playbook in preparing his team.	10.0%
22	To get his team worked up, the coach deliberately swears at an official to get thrown out of the game.	1.6%
23	To motivate players, a coach uses profanity and personal insults while coaching.	0.0%
24	In a high school game, a parent continually screams coaching instructions at his own child.	1.2%
25	At a youth soccer game, a parent yells insults at players whenever they make a mistake.	0.0%

than males chose the statements to be acceptable. For statements 13 (In football, a coach instructs the groundskeeper to soak the field to slow down an opposing team) and 15 (On the winning point of the game, a volleyball player touches the ball before it goes out, but the referee misses the touch. The player says nothing.), more males than females chose those statements as acceptable.

Significant differences within years of experience were found in statements 9 ($c^2(3, N = 248) = 11.332$, $p < .05$) and 16 ($c^2(4, N = 248) = 6.123$, $p < .05$). For both of the statements, (9 - In ice hockey, a coach sends in a player to intimidate opponents and protect his own players.; 13 - In football, a coach instructs the groundskeeper to soak the field to slow down an opposing team), coaches with 20+ years of coaching experience compared to those with less than 20 years were less likely to identify the statements as acceptable.

Significant differences within officiating experience were found in statements 4 (P = 0.029, FET) and 13 (P = 0.042, FET). Those with officiating experience compared to those without officiating experience were more likely to identify statement #4 (In football, a coach's team is out of time-outs at a crucial point in a big game. He instructs a player to fake an injury to get a needed time-out) as unacceptable, while for statement #13 (In football, a coach instructs the groundskeeper to soak the field to slow down an opposing team) they were more likely to identify the action as acceptable.

Significant differences within levels of participation were found in statements 13 (P = 0.046, FET) and 16 (P = 0.005, FET). For both statements, (13 - In football, a coach instructs the groundskeeper to soak the field to slow down an opposing team; 16 - A coach argues with an official intending to intimidate or influence future calls.) coaches with college/professional playing experience compared to those with only high school playing experience were more likely to believe the actions were acceptable. A significant difference within formal coaching training was found in statement 20 (P = 0.014, FET). For this statement, (In volleyball, an official makes a mistake in the score. The coach who benefits says nothing), coaches without formal coaching training compared to those who had training were more likely to believe the action was acceptable.

Discussion

Research by CHARACTER COUNTS!$_{SM}$ Coalition has suggested that high school athletes participating in sports have problems with cheating, poor sportsmanship, and improper gamesmanship (Character Counts, 2004, 2008). Why is it that certain athletes develop the attitude that it is acceptable to exhibit the aforementioned traits, while others do not?

Coaches have a profound effect on how athletes develop certain aspects of their character (Green & Gabbard, 1999). Through the duration of their high school playing careers, players develop an understanding of gamesmanship by observing and experiencing the ways in which their coaches handle particular situations (Stankovich, n.a.; Turman, 2003; University of Washington, 2009). Because of this impact on the character development of young athletes, coaches must perform their jobs with a high level of moral character, respect of the rules, and an understanding that the game being played is not bigger than the effect it may have on the lives of the participants.

It has been suggested that there is a possibility that athletes

develop characteristics such as cheating, poor sportsmanship, and improper gamesmanship from the individuals who coach them in the sports in which they compete (Josephson Institute, 2007). However, from the results of this study, it appears that the problem may not be that coaches are unethical or "poor" sports. In fact, coaches showed a deep understanding of proper gamesmanship and in every case identified the more appropriate choice. Additionally, there were very few significant differences based on gender, highest level of participation, year's of coaching experience, formal coaching education, and officiating experience.

It was found that the coaches as a collective group most often responded to the statements as either unacceptable or clearly unacceptable. While it is difficult to determine right and wrong for the statements, it is fair to say that the more appropriate response would be to identify the statements as unacceptable or clearly unacceptable. For almost every statement, a majority of the coaches responded believing that the statement was unacceptable or clearly unacceptable.

Two statements, 15 and 17, warrant specific discussion. Approximately 49% of the respondents believed it was acceptable/clearly acceptable that "on the winning point of the game, a volleyball player touches the ball before it goes out, but the referee misses the touch, the player says nothing" and 42% believed it was acceptable/clearly acceptable that "in tennis, a ball is called out though the player is certain it hit the line. The player says nothing and takes the point." The ethical paradox in these two statements is very interesting. Many coaches believe that it is a referee's job to regulate the game and make the decisions that pertain to a game's rules. If a referee misses a call that goes in one's favor, coaches believe they should not have to do the referee's job. However, if the coaches are on the negative end of the call, they may request a "conference" with the officials in an attempt "to help" the official.

Of all the acts of unsportsmanlike behavior that fans read about, hear about, or even witness, it is suggested from the results of this study that most coaches would not knowingly exhibit the characteristics of an individual who would act violently, exhibit poor sportsmanship, or act aggressively towards officials, other coaches, fans, or other players. Furthermore, it is the opinion of this author that these unethical, unsportsmanlike, or gamesmanship acts are isolated. While the mentioned actions may have a profound effect on the athletes who witness them, most coaches would not act in such a manner. It is apparent from the results of this survey that an overwhelming majority of coaches believe in conducting themselves in a manner that would be deemed sportsmanlike and ethical.

It is possible that some coaches may condone the use of instrumental aggression towards an opposing player. Instrumental aggression is geared at intimidating an individual to help one accomplish a goal (Loughead & Leith, 2001). Throwing inside on a batter in baseball or attacking an existing injury of an opponent are both examples that occur in sports. In statement 9, 23% of the coaches indicated that it was acceptable/clearly acceptable for an ice hockey coach to send in a player to deliberately intimidate opponents and protect their own players. Ice hockey is an aggressive, if not violent sport, and condoning violent actions could have devastating effects on how players conduct themselves on the ice.

In trying to establish the source that has the greatest influence on athletes and coaches, it is important to begin educating athletes, parents, coaches, and fans (especially extended family and students of all ages who watch games) on what is ethical, what is gamesmanship, and what is considered "good taste" at sporting events.

Conclusion

In the end, the high school coaches' responses to the statements showed that they would most often exhibit proper gamesmanship in the settings the statements depicted.

The coaches in this study, as a whole, are not to blame for the individual, isolated cases of extremely poor gamesmanship, violence, or aggression that occur in sport. They do need to be careful, however, since their words, actions, and other cues are analyzed, interpreted, and sometimes embedded into the minds of young athletes; and could be misinterpreted, misused, contorted, or negatively changed.

But where should a coach draw the line to preserve the general gamesmanship of the competitive game? A coach must remember that his or her actions can have consequences that extend beyond the game itself. Coaches have been reprimanded, fired, and even arrested for poor decisions regarding sportsmanship and gamesmanship (Simon, 2004). Overall, a coach must remember that when properly channeled, participation in sports may offer young people a positive avenue for character development, since the challenges and situations that occur during competitive sports are similar to what young adults may face later in life (Wellman, 2007). Tragically, coaches often lose sight of the fact that the impressionable athletes they coach are watching all that they do, and eventually may emulate a coach's unsportsmanlike or unethical demeanor on the court and possibly in real-life situations. It is imperative that coaches not only preach sportsmanship and ethics in sports, but also become models of the good gamesmanship they seek to develop in their athletes.

Although a fine line can be drawn between intentionally breaking the rules and unknowingly breaking the rules, it is much harder to determine if a coach is doing either one when it ultimately comes down to the admittance of guilt. In a well-known 1990 American football game between the University of Colorado and the University of Missouri, the seven officials on the field, the "chain-gang" working the sidelines, and the scoreboard operator, all lost track of the downs (Simon, 2004). This ultimately led to a fifth down for Colorado that allowed them to score the game-winning points. The ethical question that could be asked is, "Did the Colorado team intentionally cheat by accepting the win?" Colorado did not intentionally give themselves an extra down. The referees simply made a mistake. Many would argue that Colorado was not in the wrong. One could, however, fault the ethical decision of the Colorado coaches and administration for not forfeiting the win to the team that truly earned it within the rules. A clear example of cheating would be a situation in which a football player moves an already spotted ball, prior to the first down measurement while the coach contests the spot. This is an obvious act of cheating and would draw a 15-yard penalty, but the new spot could give the team a first down and 10, instead of a turnover on downs.

One limitation of this study is that it is reliant on the honesty of the coaches who were surveyed. A second limitation relies on the interpretation of the statements by the coaches. It is possible that some of the statements could have been confusing since coaches could interpret some of the terminology differently than what was intended by the researcher. Closely related to the limitation of interpretation would be an uncertainty of the rules of particular sports. If a coach was not familiar with the rules or gamesmanship values of a given sport, he or she may not have been able to make a fair evaluation of the statement. Finally, it must be noted that the survey was only given to coaches in one state, thus limiting the analysis to the coaches of that state.

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