



Sportsmanship in Youth Sports

The Parents Association for Youth Sports

A Proactive Method of Spectator Behavior Management

GREG BACH

Can a program this simple really work? You bet!

Much of the childish behavior that occurs in youth sports these days ironically takes place not on the field but in the stands. While the majority of today's parents are supportive and caring people who do a wonderful job of keeping everything in perspective when it comes to their children and sports, an increasing number have become disruptive with their negative words and immature actions. This bad behavior has grabbed the full attention of recreation professionals, who have begun putting their programs under tighter scrutiny and enacting tougher measures to ensure that games end in handshakes rather than fistfights.

Although scientifically rigorous statistics documenting an increase in such behavior are lacking, several surveys indicate the scope and seriousness of the problem ("Spectator Behavior," 2001). In August 2001, *Sports Illustrated for Kids* published a survey of 3,000 youths who were questioned about violence in sports. Seventy-four percent said they had witnessed out-of-control adults at their games, and the two most commonly observed types of bad behavior were parents yelling at children and parents yelling at officials or coaches. Similarly, Survey USA polled 500 parents in Indianapolis and found that 55 percent reported having witnessed parents in a verbal dispute at a youth sport event, while 21 percent had seen a physical altercation. Another Survey USA poll, in South Florida, found that 56 percent of adults had seen aggressive parents at youth sport events.

Here are a few of the violent incidents at youth sport events that took place in the past year:

- In Iowa, after a basketball game among 10- and 11-year-olds, an irate mother attacked a pregnant referee. According to police reports, she grabbed the referee by the hair, threw her to the ground, and kicked her ("Out of Bounds," 2006, Summer).
- During a girls' rugby tournament game in California, a coach and several parents beat the opposing coach unconscious with kicks to the head and face, according to witnesses. Police are pursuing criminal charges against several adults ("Out of Bounds," 2006, Winter).
- On October 29, 2005, at a youth football game for elementary-age children in Washington, Indiana, an angry father came out of the stands and confronted a referee on the field. The referee told him to return to the stands, but when the referee turned to walk away, the parent reportedly pushed him to the ground. The parent was charged with battery (National Association of Sports Officials, 2005a).
- On November 5, 2005, during a football game at Fort Meade High School in Florida, an enraged man reportedly rushed onto the field and punched a referee in the face at least six times. Charged with battery, the man could face five years in prison (National Association of Sports Officials, 2005b).
- In Massachusetts, after a high school boys' soccer game on October 26, 2005, a father of two players allegedly attacked referee Jeffrey Rousseau from behind as Rousseau was walking to his car. Rousseau was knocked unconscious for about 30 seconds

and suffered a dislocated jaw and mild concussion (National Association of Sports Officials, 2005c).

Parents who behave irrationally at their child's athletic events, or have unrealistic expectations for performance, can cause tremendous emotional damage to their child, as well as create havoc for the entire sports program. These out-of-control behaviors are disrupting youth sports and turning what should be a rewarding and fun-filled experience for youngsters into a negative experience that may discourage their child's future participation in organized sports. Furthermore, these behaviors that children witness from adults sends a message to them that winning at all costs is the only thing that matters and that cheating and brutality are acceptable. Children who are instilled with these attitudes may themselves add to the problem one day.

In order to address this problem, the National Alliance For Youth Sports (NAYS), a nonprofit organization that advocates for positive and safe sports for children, began the Parents Association for Youth Sports (PAYS) program in 1999.

The PAYS Program

The PAYS program aims to give parents a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities in youth sports. The 30-minute program is designed to teach parents sportsmanlike behaviors that they can, in turn, pass on to their children. The program requires parents to watch a 19-minute video and read and sign a Parents' Code of Ethics, pledging themselves to adhere to specific standards of behavior.

Parents may access the program either through a participating recreation department or online. The program costs \$6 online or \$5 through a recreation department.

Parents who complete the program receive a subscription to *SportingKid* magazine, the official member publication of NAYS, as well as a parent handbook and PAYS membership card.

More than 500 organizations across the country are currently using PAYS to try to prevent parent behavior problems in their programs. In fact, a growing number of organizations even require that parents attend these sportsmanship classes before their child is allowed to participate in a sport. More than 125,000 families have participated in the PAYS program since its inception.

The PAYS program has had a positive impact in countless communities. Even in communities without any previous behavior problems, the PAYS program provides another layer of protection to reduce the chance of an incident occurring.

The large majority of parents who went through the mandatory PAYS program offered by the Greensboro (North Carolina) Parks and Recreation Department a few years ago believe that all parents should receive this type of education, according to an independent study conducted by D & R Management Consultants on behalf of the department (Jean Jackson, personal communication, February 2003). The study found that an overwhelming 82 percent of the parents said they should be educated on the effect their behavior can have on youth sports events and that it was appropriate

for the city to undertake such a program. Jean Jackson, the athletics director for the Greensboro Parks and Recreation Department, said,

I had no idea what the survey results would be. However, I was very excited that 82 percent were actually on the same page as our staff by expressing that the city should take on the task of educating parents on their behavior at sports events. ...More than anything else I think the study helped us know that we were doing things based on the will of the people. It helped us to know that we were proactive, and somewhat innovative by making the program so accessible via the cable channel and recreation centers. We feel good that we were on target. (personal communication, February 2003)

The study also revealed the following:

- 67.9 percent felt that the education should be mandatory.
- 51 percent felt that the PAYS program had contributed to modifying their own behavior.
- 50.3 percent felt that the behavior of others had been modified.
- 82 percent did not feel that the \$5 fee to go through the program was a deterrent to enrolling children in youth sports.

These types of positive results were also found when a study was done on the impact of PAYS on the Jupiter-Tequesta (Florida) Athletic Association (Jeff Leslie, personal communication, March 2001). The JTAA was the first recreation agency in the country to require that parents attend the PAYS program before their child was allowed to participate in JTAA-sponsored youth sports programs. Before parents went through the PAYS program, JTAA conducted a survey that found the following:

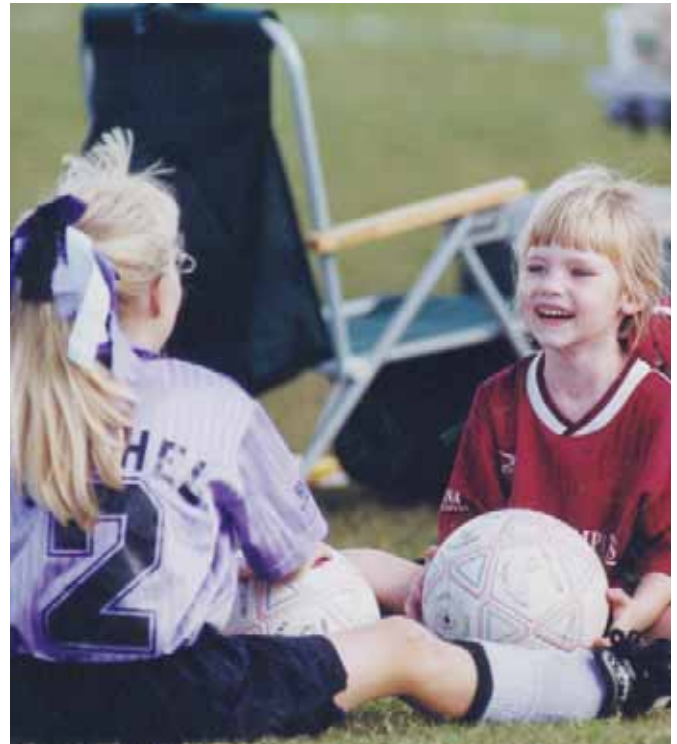


Photo courtesy of the National Alliance For Youth Sports

Fun and friendship are among the chief goals of a good youth-sport experience.

- 68 percent of parents surveyed had a positive reaction to being told they would be required to attend the PAYS program.

- 76 percent indicated that they had sometime in the past felt uncomfortable because of other parents' behavior at a game.

- 97 percent indicated that youth sports programs should outline procedures for handling unruly or disruptive parents.

To judge the effect of the PAYS program, JTAA surveyed parents who had completed the program, yielding the following results:

- 93 percent supported the implementation of the PAYS program.

- 60 percent witnessed a positive change in parent behavior since the PAYS program had been implemented.

- 51 percent felt more committed to their child's athletic participation.

- 67 percent felt more of an obligation to assist the league in meeting its stated goals.

- 62 percent felt empowered to stand up against negative acts that undermine their child's youth program.

- 84 percent had a positive reaction to the meeting after attending the PAYS program. This included being impressed with the program, believing it benefited parents, and accepting the program as a requirement for their child to participate.

Recommendations for Communities

In 2001, NAYS hosted the National Summit on Raising Community Standards in Children's Sports in Chicago to

address the issue of unruly adult behavior at organized youth sports events around the country. More than 50 representatives from parks and recreation agencies nationwide came together to examine the problem and, more importantly, to devise a meaningful approach to correct it. The strategy that the summit delegates developed was unveiled through the *Recommendations for Communities* in 2002, which have been endorsed by the National Recreation and Park Association (NAYS, 2002).

The recommendations call for communities to step back and evaluate what is occurring on their publicly owned facilities, and they address how communities can change the culture of youth sports and reinstate a fun and stress-free playing environment for youngsters through reform, education, and accountability. In particular, the recommendations stress the importance of implementing three steps, as summarized in table 1.

Commenting on the recommendations, Fred Engh, founder and president of NAYS, said,

The Recommendations for Communities clearly establishes the field of parks and recreation as the solution to providing all children in sports with a safe and positive experience on publicly owned facilities. The Recommendations were created by professional recreators for professional recreators. Now is the time to put them into action. Children are depending on us. It's up to concerned citizens, regardless of their role in the community, to unite and push for positive change. We all must work together in order to change the culture of youth sports. (personal communication, January 2005)

Table 1. Summary of Recommendations for Communities

1. Adopt a community philosophy that makes youth sports safe and positive for children.
 - Local leaders must adopt a resolution that clearly states how youth sports should operate in their community.
 - Every public entity or volunteer user-group using the community's facilities must be required to meet the standards set forth in the resolution.
 - The philosophy and rules laid down by the community to ensure that every child has a positive and safe experience must be strictly monitored and enforced equally for everyone.
2. Appoint a professional youth-sports administrator to ensure adherence to the philosophy.
 - Along with overseeing their own programs, the administrator's role is to work closely with each group that applies to use the community's facilities to ensure that rules and policies are clearly understood and that deviating from them will not be tolerated in any way.
 - With an administrator in place, programs can be strictly monitored to ensure that they meet established standards; and problems that arise can be addressed in a more timely fashion with the person adhering to the established protocol for resolving issues before they escalate into something unmanageable.
3. Hold everyone associated with the program accountable for their behavior.
 - Through the professional youth-sports administrator, leagues that use facilities can be monitored and regularly evaluated on their effectiveness.
 - In order to effectively monitor all the youth sports programming, leagues or groups interested in using the public facilities for an organized youth-sports program must be required to complete an application and fulfill established requirements.
 - Facility use will be granted only to those groups who abide and enforce the written policies and procedures; who require screening, training, and continuing education for its volunteer coaches; who require a preseason orientation program for all of its parents; and who provide a pre-sports motor-skill development program for young children.

Source: National Alliance For Youth Sports, 2002

Conclusion

All parents want—and deserve—the very best for their children. Whether it is dance recitals, soccer games or spelling bees, they want to see their child succeed. While most parents do a wonderful job of keeping a sense of perspective when it comes to organized sports, many others stray into unreasonable behavior that often creates the problems that we read about in newspapers and hear about on local newscasts.

Being a parent of a youth sports participant is not easy these days. Parents often have to walk a tightrope between offering positive encouragement and applying unnecessary pressure and stress. Nevertheless, children deserve to have a rewarding experience in whatever sport they choose to participate in, and parents have the responsibility to make sure that happens. By taking a proactive approach through the Parents Association for Youth Sports, communities can help ensure that the best possible experience is provided to every child who steps onto a field, court, or rink in an organized program.

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Greg Bach (gbach@nays.org) is communications director for the National Alliance For Youth Sports, West Palm Beach, FL 33411.

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special district park and recreation agencies and by schools and not for profit organizations.

The ubiquity of youth sports would seem to provide a seed bed for the development of creative, healthy lifestyles and human happiness. Yet, troubling evidence suggests that these fertile soils are not being gardened appropriately. Rather than witnessing an emergence of creative, healthy, and happy youths from our youth sport programs, we are, with increasing and distressing frequency, witnessing heartbreaking and appalling stories of aggression, violence, and destruction.

Physical and verbal abuse involving parents, coaches, and officials is widespread. Parents assault coaches, coaches assault officials, and parents and coaches demean children, all on the “watch” of the current generation of recreation, fitness, and exercise professionals. Clearly, we are not creating environments that are conducive to the development of creative, healthy lifestyles and human happiness. We must commit to significant change in the ways that we stage sport experiences for youths.

This *Leisure Today* feature is dedicated to that cause. It presents four articles that provide different, but related perspectives on the challenge of staging youth sport experiences that can be expected to promote creativity, health, and happiness.

The article by Greg Bach, of the National Alliance For Youth Sports, focuses on the role of the parents. Bach introduces the “Parents Association for Youth Sports” program, an initiative of the National Alliance For Youth Sports. Greg’s article demonstrates how parental involvement can be redirected toward development of a positive youth sport environment.

Another pivotal facet of the youth sport environment are the referees and officials. Elaine Raakman tackles this issue through her description of the JustPlay program. JustPlay is a management system that, among many other functions, allows league managers to make staffing decisions that optimize the fit between particular competitions and the nature and disposition of officials who are assigned to those events.

In part two of this feature, next month, Mary Wells, Edward Ruddell, and Karen Paisley provide a systems perspective on the staging of experiences in youth sport. Their article describes a systems evaluation of a set of sportsmanship facilitating techniques that are deduced from pro-social behavior theory.

Finally, Jay Goldstein and Seppo Iso-Ahola provide a very thoughtful perspective on the sportsmanship issue from the perspective of sport psychologists. Their article delves into key issues related to the role of sport in youth development, and it concludes with specific policy recommendations.

Each of the articles points to specific techniques that may be implemented by youth sport providers. It is clear from these articles and related resources that the virtually ubiquitous problem of poor sportsmanship need not persist. Through commitment to new policies and implementation of inexpensive, readily available techniques, committed professionals may change the face of youth sports and begin to celebrate the emergence of creative, healthy, and happy young adults from youth sport programs.

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Gary Ellis (Gary.Ellis@utah.edu) is a professor in the Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism at the University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT 84112.