

Chalkboard

By

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Sportsmanship? That topic has been broached to me on several different occasions this year. In most of the conversations, the gist of the discussion has been on how to promote better examples of it within our athletics program. Some have named names of various student athletes that the person calling would like to see being a better sportsman. Some have named coaches with the same purpose in mind. Some have wanted to discuss the behavior of other parents. Some felt a desire to berate various referees for their calls. It seemed like every caller was an expert in the area. Most made good points that I listened to and shared with other staff members.

Unfortunately, thirty years in education has not made me an expert in this arena. The years, however, have given me pause to reflect on what I think is proper conduct and what is the proper attitude to take to the stadium and to the gymnasium. Restated, I will try and paint you a word picture of what I think is a good sport. With your liberty, I will share my thoughts about the groups named above and this concept of being a good sport. I am not asking you to agree with my observations; I have already testified I am not an expert.

From my experience, young people choose to participate in athletics for one or a combination of three reasons- they genuinely like playing the sport, or because athletes are thought to be popular, or because they are trying to please their parents. Those that like the sport in itself and for itself generally are the best sportsmen because to play the game to win, they have come to understand that being in control of oneself is vital to success. They are the ones who rarely sling their helmets, never risk a technical foul in a tight game, or draw attention to themselves with childish antics. They are the first to offer a hand to a fallen opponent, the first to encourage a struggling teammate, and the first to give credit for a win to someone else. When the win doesn't come, they are the first to speak of the next game and the first one to the next practice. They don't whine and they don't attempt to blame the loss on somebody else. They play hard to the end and when the final gun or buzzer sounds they walk to the dressing room looking like a winner regardless of what the scoreboard says.

Coaches are the second key to most students developing the traits of good sportsmanship. They are the key because they are the ones who set the expectations for the team. They have the power to enforce those expectations because they are the ones who choose what players take the field or the court and decide how long that player can remain on the court or the field. They are the ones who teach young men and women that how the game is played is just as important as the final outcome. It is the coaches' task to explain that games have rules for a purpose and that following those rules never causes a player or team to lose a competition. As important as what they say, how a coach acts in the heat of competition speaks volumes to his or her team. If a coach has a rule against the use of profanity, then that coach must not curse for students will only respect the rules of a person who disciplines himself or herself to equally follow. If a coach promotes self-control on the court, that coach must be self-controlled. If a coach wants his or her team to be good sportsmen, then he or she must lead in that direction by being a good sport.

I stood one night this year at a football game listening to the conversation of a group of men behind me. I wasn't too surprised to hear their words of scorn being directed at the coaches; some men are just bent in that direction. I was cut to my heart when their boisterous haranguing focused on some of the players on the field. I was encouraged that one mother of a player standing in the same locale, listening to the same heckling, kept right on hollowing out encouragement to the team even though we were being slaughtered. The same night another mother of another player gave some of the other team's school officials a good "cussing" followed by a later apology to them from me. I made contact with the other school's superintendent the next day also to apologize. I never want Gentry as a community to be branded by the behavior of a few mad individuals.

I understand how parents can get caught up in this type behavior described above. No one is more important to parents than their child. When someone gets on their child's case, right or wrong, it's a natural thing to go in the protect and/or attack mode. Sad to confess, I have been there in that mode myself when my sons were young.

I wish all parents could remember two things and that some parents could remember one more. The two things are- "It's a game; it's not your child's life at stake" and "Your attitude at home helps shape your child's attitude on the field". The third for some is, "Hey, you aren't playing anymore, give them a turn." (Sorry to say, I've been there too.)

I have only three brief observations on referees. Referees' calls do not win or lose championships. If you give referees too many pieces of your mind, soon you won't have any left. If you hallow at them all the time, your team never gets the close calls when you need them most.

If you are a parent and read this, I hope you didn't think I was lecturing you. That's not my style and not my place. If I want to be talk to you about something I perceive is a problem with your child, I'll say it to your face; I won't hallow it at you over a fence or send it to you in a letter.

Parents, please do encourage you child to be their best in athletics and every thing else in life. If you once played their sport and can give them pointers on how to be better, then that's your duty also. I said coaches are the second key to children becoming good sports; you are the first.

I love our teams and I respect our faithful fans. I want us to win every time we take the field, the court, the track, or whatever. But I am not all about winning. I'm all about our students being good sports, win nor loss. Some students will be that way just because of how they are. The rest will have to have our expectations, our teachings, and our examples to follow.