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Four First Steps of a Youth League Philosophy

By Dan Doyle

(This op-ed piece appeared in the Hartford Courant)

Step I – The Value of Team

An essential goal of youth league administrators and coaches is to foster within young players (and parents) an appreciation for the value and responsibilities of being on a team. This objective can be achieved by setting team-building goals to which every team member can aspire. Player goals include:

1. Put team goals ahead of personal goals.
2. Try to be the hardest worker on the team.
3. Try to be the most enthusiastic player on the team.
4. Try to be the most coachable player on the team.
5. Try to maintain a positive attitude which will help energize both you and your teammates.
6. Most importantly, care about your teammates, including those with whom you have little in common. The coach can draw a "circle of caring" and explain that on a new team a player may already know and care about a few teammates, but players should work to widen that circle of caring to include every team member.

Step II – The Role of the Parents

League administrators should make parents aware of their team-building objective, and establish clear expectations for league parents and families.

- The league welcomes parental input regarding concerns of ethics, sportsmanship or the safety of a child.
- The league respectfully asks families not to intrude upon "coach domain" issues such as playing time, playing position or strategy, because parental intrusion hinders team building and creates ill will.

Step III – The Journey Toward Proficiency

The third step involves facilitating a youngster's development of proficiency in a sport. The following steps are helpful:

1. All youth league coaches should learn how to teach the core fundamentals of the sport. The coach plans fun, purposeful practice sessions during which a block of time is always devoted to fundamentals.
2. In youth leagues, a coach's focus should be on encouraging skill development/performance goals. The coach needs to teach the distinction between skill development/performance goals such as "follow through on every shot," or "hustle on every play," and outcome goals such as earning a spot on the All-Star team. Committing to skill development/performance goals will always help a player achieve broader outcome goals.
3. Teach the value of delayed gratification. The coach should remind the players and parents that one of the most valuable benefits of sports is understanding that results do not come instantly. The coach's consistent message should be that improvement is a gradual process requiring effort and focus, and that success and satisfaction will often follow.

Step IV – Fair Play

The coach makes sportsmanship a consistent priority, and reminds players and parents that playing

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THE PRACTICAL VALUE OF GOOD SPORTSMANSHIP

By Dan Doyle

(This op-ed piece appeared in the *Providence Journal*)

In 1989, I approached Rhode Island Senators Claiborne Pell and John Chafee regarding the creation of a National Sportsmanship Day. Both Senators expressed support for the idea, and encouraged me to research the extent to which sportsmanship initiatives were being administered in schools throughout the country. The Senators offered to assist by appointing a team of staffers to help me analyze the level of sportsmanship activities in American schools.

The research, which took place over a six-month period, made it clear that virtually no formal attention was being paid to sportsmanship in schools or leagues at that time. Based on this information, Senators Chafee and Pell hosted a press conference in the Senate chambers to announce the official creation of National Sportsmanship Day, and the appointment of the Institute for International Sport as the administrators of this annual program, to be celebrated on the first Tuesday of each March. The first National Sportsmanship Day was held on March 5, 1991 in approximately 3,000 schools. On March 6, 2007, the 17th annual National Sportsmanship Day will be celebrated in approximately 13,500 schools throughout the United States and in many other countries, including Australia, Nigeria, Ghana and Ireland. By visiting our website, www.internationalsport.com/nsd a school, travel team, or club team can plan National Sportsmanship Day activities, either on March 6th or at some point in the future, as NSD is truly a year-round initiative.

Mark Twain once observed that travel is fatal to prejudice. Over the years, we have found that good discussion is fatal to bad sportsmanship. A key objective of National Sportsmanship Day is to encourage student-athletes, coaches, parents and administrators to engage in dialogue on key sportsmanship issues. The website presents many age-based discussion topics for athletes from elementary through university, including a special discussion for high school and university students on the Fourth Amendment and performance enhancing drugs.

Here are four examples of the practical value of good sportsmanship that parents may wish to impart to their children, and consider themselves.

I. Competitive Self-Restraint

My forthcoming book, the *Encyclopedia of Sport's Parenting*, includes a survey of 500 highly successful individuals, ranging from US Senators to CEOs. Eighty-six percent of those surveyed told us that they had played sports in their youth. Many indicated that learning to compete hard while maintaining self-control was a benefit they had carried forward in life. In the *Encyclopedia*, I have coined the phrase "Competitive Self-Restraint" to describe this invaluable quality.

People who are able to employ this mindset – whether on the field or in a professional environment – almost always have a clear advantage over those who are unable to control their emotions.

Lesson: Parents should foster the practice of competitive self-restraint in their young athletes, and make clear that a loss of self-control will result in clearly stated consequences, such as being pulled out of the next game or practice. Taking away a practice or game will almost surely cool the fiery temper of a young player in need of such a life lesson.

II. Parent Behavior at Games

When parents attend a game in which their child is competing, their self-restraint is likely to be challenged, sometimes severely. Many parents identify so closely with their child's performance that they take it very personally when a "bad call" or rough play occurs.

Pearl Buck once wrote that, "Every great mistake has a halfway moment, a split second when it can be recalled and perhaps remedied." Whenever parents feel that they are about to lose control, they should consider the unfortunate consequences that result from irate behavior, including the fact that parent outbursts at games are now a media lightening rod.

Lesson: Never have I seen the decision by a parent to enter a conflict at a sporting event prove to be a better one than to retreat from a conflict!

III. Integrity Conflicts with Gamesmanship

- **Integrity:**
"Steadfast adherence to a strict moral or ethical code."
- **Gamesmanship:**
"The art or practice of winning games by use of questionable expedients."¹

While writing the *Encyclopedia* over the last seven years, I have spoken at approximately 80 colleges and universities on behalf of the NCAA Foundation. Two clear points have emerged from these experiences:

1. While most college students can offer a clear definition of sportsmanship, few even know the meaning of gamesmanship, and still fewer have considered how gamesmanship clashes with integrity.

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Lesson: Parents must help young athletes understand the meaning of gamesmanship as it applies to their sport(s), and that maintaining one's integrity begins with adhering not only to the rules of the sports, but to the spirit of the rules. Parents (and coaches) should share with young athletes a point from ethicist Michael Josephson: "Victory without honor is profoundly unsatisfying."

Our book surveys and interviews make clear that this statement is particularly true when one reaches adulthood.

IV. Empathy and the Sports Experience

Some athletes and coaches believe that empathy toward opponents gets in the way of winning. Yet many of the greatest coaches and players are empathetic people who are discerning enough to respect the boundaries of fierce competition.

Young athletes should be presented with these simple guidelines:

I. During the Game:

- Compete hard but within the rules.
- Know when victory is secured; do not embarrass an opponent who is already beaten.

II. After the Game:

- Always treat your opponent with civility and respect.

Lesson: Every parent and coach should make clear to a young athlete that empathy is not only at the core of a moral society, but an essential ingredient to fixing and maintaining relationships. A child who learns empathy will have a richer life than one who fails to cultivate this vital character trait.

A poem in the *Encyclopedia* concludes with these stanzas:

The honorable competitor
 Is quick to discern
 A valuable lesson
 All players need learn

The noble effort
 Required to win
 Stops at the point
 Of rubbing it in.

¹Taken from Webster's Dictionary

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