

The Need for Good Sportsmanship

John Churdar, Ed.D. Edited with permission from BJU Press.

The late Vince Lombardi, former great coach of the Green Bay Packers and the Washington Redskins, was famous for his statement, "Winning isn't the most important thing; it's the only thing!" Shortly before he died, he looked back at the quote and declared, "I wish I'd never said it. I meant the effort. I sure didn't mean for people to crush human values and morality."

Yet many coaches on the youth-sport, high school, college, and professional levels have adopted a "win at any cost" philosophy. Situation ethics abound as players and coaches are willing to do "whatever it takes to win." But the secular philosophy of winning at any cost has no place in the Christian high school. The athletic program of a Christian school is probably the most visible part of the school in the community, and we need to strive to have the best possible testimony for the Lord. Good sportsmanship should have a higher priority than winning for the Christian high school coach. I do not mean to imply that winning isn't important, but the testimony of those involved in the athletic program is more important than the win-loss record.

The Meaning of Sportsmanship

A sportsman has been defined as a person who can take loss or defeat without complaint, or victory without gloating, and who treats his opponents with fairness, generosity, and courtesy. Unsportsmanlike behavior, according to the NCAA, is "to act in a manner unbecoming a fair, ethical, honorable individual. [In basketball] it consists of acts of deceit such as accepting a foul that should be charged to a teammate; faking being fouled; throwing a free throw awarded to another; disrespect such as making debasing or critical remarks about or to an official or an opponent; vulgarity, profanity, filthy language or obscene gestures whether or not directed to someone."

It has been said that good sportsmanship is the Golden Rule in action. We should treat others as we would like to be treated. The Christian competitor should desire for his opponent what he desires for himself: a fair, hard-fought contest. He should play within the spirit as well as the letter of the rules. The desire to win, as important as it is, cannot take precedence over honesty and principled action for the Christian. Fair play and ethical behavior should be evident in every athletic contest, but especially between two Christian schools.

Fundamentals of Sportsmanship

The American Association for Health, Physical Education, and Recreation listed the fundamentals of sportsmanship in its 1970 publication, *Crowd Control for High School Athletics*.

Show respect for the opponent at all times. The opponents should be treated as guests; greeted cordially on arriving; given the best accommodations; and accorded the tolerance, honesty, and generosity which all human beings deserve. A time of fellowship with both teams and a challenge from God's Word would be appropriate for Christian schools.

Show respect for the officials. Good sportsmanship implies the willingness to accept and abide by the decisions of the officials. To criticize the officials is to teach young people to disregard the "authority principle." Certainly the Christian high school should hire only competent officials who have nothing to do with the host school or church.

Know, understand, and appreciate the rules of the contest. A familiarity with the current rules of the game and the recognition of their necessity for a fair contest are essential. Good sportsmanship suggests the importance of conforming to the spirit as well as the letter of the rules.

Maintain self-control at all times. A prerequisite of good sportsmanship is understanding that rational behavior and personal testimony are more important than the desire to win. Good sportsmanship is concerned with the behavior of all involved in the game (coach, players, cheerleaders, teachers, principal, pastor, parents, and other spectators). It has been suggested that some pastors come to the game, greet folks, and then go home so that they don't blow it with their testimony.

Recognize and appreciate skill in performance, regardless of affiliation. Applause for an opponent's good performance is a demonstration of generosity and good will that should not be looked on as treason. The ability to recognize quality in performance and the willingness to acknowledge it without regard to team membership is one of the most highly commendable gestures of good sportsmanship.

Groups Responsible for Sportsmanship

The National Federation, the governing body for public high school sports, would like for the number one priority of high school athletics to be GOOD SPORTSMANSHIP. The Federation's Sportsmanship, Ethics and Integrity Committee has identified nine groups within the public high school setting that have sportsmanship responsibilities. Some of those groups within the Christian high school are as follows:

Coaches. The coach bears the greatest burden of responsibility for sportsmanship. His influence upon the attitudes and behavior of the players, the student body, and the fans is unequalled. It is essential that the coach subscribe to the values of sportsmanship and teach its principles through word and deed. Honoring the player on the team who has exhibited the best sportsmanship over the most valuable player is one way to demonstrate that support for sportsmanship.

Players. Because players are admired and respected, they exert a great deal of influence over the actions and behavior of other players and the spectators. Christian high school players need to treat opponents with the respect that is due them as guests and fellow believers, not as the enemy. Shake hands with opponents and wish them well before the contest. Exercise self-control at all times, accepting decisions of the coach and the officials and abiding by them. Respect the officials' judgment and interpretation of the rules.

Administrators. The principal of the Christian school and the pastor of the church are in this group. They set the tone for sportsmanship. If the principal and the pastor do not exhibit self-control at a ball game, the fans, the players, and the coach cannot be expected to do so. The need for good sportsmanship should be continually addressed by the principal in the school chapel programs and pep rallies, and the pastor should reinforce it by his comments from the pulpit.

Athletic Directors. The athletic director has the opportunity to build positive relationships with opponent schools. As head of the athletic program, he is expected to model exemplarily sportsmanship before the coaches, athletes and spectators.

Spectators. Spectators are probably the most difficult group to monitor, but an effort to control them must be made. Christian schools should be willing to refund the admission price and ask obnoxious fans to leave the game. The team's followers from the church/community reflect on the school's testimony just as the players, coach, other faculty, and the students do.

Leagues and Associations. It is necessary for the league and association members to also make good sportsmanship priority number one in the athletic programs of member schools. Leagues and associations need to penalize players, coaches, or schools when incidents occur in a sporting event that reflect badly on their Christian testimony.

Your Testimony Is at Stake

Lou Alley, president of the American Association for Health, Physical Education, and Recreation in 1971, said athletics are neither good nor bad. They are like a two-edged sword. Whether they are good or bad depends upon who wields the sword and how he wields it. That puts the responsibility squarely on the shoulders of the coach.

I Corinthians 10:31 says, Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God. "All" includes our Christian high school sports programs. The problem many have is that they try to separate sports from the Christian life. An illustration of this occurred during a church softball tournament in Cincinnati back in 1987. A pastor opened the tournament in prayer, asking God to help each team to demonstrate good sportsmanship. One of the first calls was a bang-bang play at first base where the umpire called the runner out. The runner was vehemently protesting the call, and the umpire recognized him as the pastor who had prayed before the game. When reminded of his prayer, the pastor said, "When I cross the white lines and I'm out on a close play, I'm not a reverend anymore." The attitude that how we conduct ourselves in sports is not as important as how we conduct ourselves in other areas of life is all too common. [It's unbiblical compartmentalization!] We must realize that moral behavior and conduct carry off the athletic field or basketball court into life. If we do not properly emphasize the importance of sportsmanship and fair play in our Christian school athletic programs, we may find that our athletic programs are at cross-purposes with the overall testimony of the Christian school.

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