

Guidelines for Teaching Sportsmanship

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Be a good role model. As a coach, you must constantly keep in mind that your actions do, in fact, speak louder than words. No matter what you say, what you do will have an effect on your players. You must do everything you can to show your players what it means to be a good sport by treating opposing players and coaches, officials, team members, and the sport in which you participate with respect. An obvious corollary: Admit to your players when you fall short of your own sportsmanship ideals.

Emphasize sportsmanship from the beginning. The process of “coaching for character” should start early, from your first contact with players. If you’re recruiting a player to come out for the team or a player comes to you to discuss trying out, what you say will set the tone for your relationship with that player. At the first team meeting with your players you should explain how much you value sportsmanship. Tell them what your expectations are, how you understand the basic principles of sportsmanship, and why these principles are important.

Talk about combining seriousness and playfulness. Since the principles of sportsmanship are based on the very nature of sport, and sport is a form of competitive play, explain to your players that sport is “serious fun.” Help them understand that bad sportsmanship is often a matter of being “too serious,” of forgetting that there’s more to sport than winning, and, in some cases, a matter of not being serious enough, of forgetting that striving to be excellent and striving to win within the rules and customs of the game are essential parts of competition. Try to show this balance in your own attitude and in your comments. Be serious when it’s called for; cut up, kid around, and have fun when it’s called for. How you express this balance will in part depend on your own personality, but the need for a balance between playfulness and seriousness is not a matter of personal preference or personality. It comes from the nature of the activity you’re engaging in, competitive play. Take your responsibilities seriously, but don’t take yourself too seriously.

Talk about the relationship between sportsmanship and success. Make sure your players understand that “success” in sports is not merely a matter of achieving victory, and that victory without sportsmanship, dignity, and honor is hollow. At the same time, try to show your players that respect for the team and your sport, as well as respect between the players and the coach, might help develop habits and talents that will improve your chances of winning.

Regularly use the language of sportsmanship. The language of sportsmanship should become a regular part of your coaching vocabulary. Don’t leave this language behind after the first team meeting. The language of “respect” should be heard by your players often. If you earn their respect, the language you use around them will become a part of their way of looking at things. Never underestimate the power of

language. The right words make it possible to understand things we couldn't otherwise understand.

Expect sportsmanship in practice as well as in games. Since we are encouraging you to develop the habits of good sportsmanship in your players, don't reserve instruction for games only. Expect good behavior, the habit of showing respect, in practice.

Establish team rules, customs, rituals, and traditions that reinforce the principles of sportsmanship. While it is crucial to talk about the basic principles of sportsmanship, it is probably even more important to be specific about your expectations. Establish specific team rules that promote good sportsmanship. It's a good idea to list the rules and place them in the context of the principles of sportsmanship. If you demand 100 percent effort at all times, then explain this demand with reference to respecting your opponents, your teammates, and the game. As much as possible, be specific about how you expect your players to relate to opponents, officials, and each other.

When the opportunity arises, try to develop customs, rituals, and traditions that will promote sportsmanship. Some customs and rituals you can simply demand, like the postgame handshake. Others develop out of the special relations and situations; some of them the players develop on their own. Take advantage of those developments.

Encourage players to take the perspective of other participants in sports. Since sportsmanship demands proper *perspective*, help players to understand and imaginatively to appreciate others' points of view. This is analogous to the moral education of a child, when a parent sometimes says something like, "How would it make you feel if someone did that to you?" Talk about the "silver rule." Talk about how opponents and officials might look at you and your players.

Develop clear guidelines for dealing with unsportsmanlike behavior. Make it clear to your players from the beginning of the season how you will deal with actions that violate the principles of sportsmanship. If you decide not to allow taunting, showboating, or arguing with officials, tell the players what the specific penalty (or gradations of penalties) will be if the rules are violated. You can spell out the sequence of possible punishments and explain that you will decide how serious the violation has been; in other words, you don't have to decide in advance what the penalty for every possible violation will be, but you do have to be clear that there are consequences for violations. Be clear about the process. If you'll make the decisions, say that. If you'll allow the team to be involved, say that.

Reinforce good sportsmanship. If good sportsmanship matters to you, show the players, parents, and fans it matters by rewarding good behavior in some manner. The most obvious way to do this is through praise, respectful behavior, and playing time. At the end of the season, make sure that team awards include sportsmanship, either as a separate award or as a necessary condition for all awards.

Communicate the importance of sportsmanship to parents. Before the season starts, meet with parents and explain to them the value you place on sportsmanship. Enlist their help and support in reinforcing your expectations with their children.

Communicate the importance of sportsmanship to fans. Depending on the situation in which you coach, some kind of public announcement concerning sportsmanship is important. You might address this issue over the public address system at a game, or in a printed handout. You can encourage your school or league officials to adopt rules concerning the misbehavior of fans at home games or matches. Try to develop an educational campaign at your school or in your league or organization promoting the ideals of sportsmanship among fans. Rituals at the beginning of a game showing respect for the opponents can help set the tone for the fans. Your remarks at social functions, postgame interviews on the radio, and so on can also set the tone.

Talk about news stories concerning sportsmanship with your players. Since most of your players are probably sports fans, use current sporting events as an opportunity for discussing sportsmanship with them. When a famous athlete does something controversial or especially laudable, ask your players what they think about the event. Ask them what they would do if they were the coach. Discuss with them how you would deal with that sort of behavior. To some extent, you can help them to see which famous athletes deserve our respect and which do not.

Promote reflectiveness by asking questions. Remember that you are a teacher and that good teaching often involves asking the right questions, rather than giving the students carefully packaged answers. Encourage players to think for themselves and make their own reasoned judgments about their experiences or examples you call attention to.

Talk about the history of your sport with players. Talk with your athletes about the historical traditions, innovations, and heroes of your sport in order to broaden their perspective and enrich their sense of participating in something bigger than themselves. Tell good stories. Encourage players to read about the history of their sport in order to develop a respect for the fullness of the game.

Expect players to know the rule book. To encourage players to respect the game as well as the officials, encourage them to study the rule book. Ask them questions about the interpretation of difficult situations if they were officiating. Play "You make the call."

Show by your actions and your words that you care, that what you're trying to teach is important. No matter how much your players may seem to resist you, many of your values will become theirs. Let them know that it matters how they behave, what kind of human beings they will be whether they do things well or poorly.

Don't forget to have fun. Remember it's a game. It's serious, it matters, but it's play. Show your players that what they're doing matters, but don't take yourself too seriously. If no one is having fun, you're not playing a game anymore.

