

SHEENY, TERRY
Raising a Team Player (2002)

S E V E N

SPORTSMANSHIP & CHARACTER

Athletes should always try to win, but there's a fine line between competing hard and being immature and out of control. If kids' competitive instincts are focused primarily on the experience of playing a sport well as a team, they tend to mature quickly and develop a strong sense of character. However, kids who are allowed to focus exclusively on personal results often reveal poor sportsmanship and a lack of character.

Young athletes can be extremely competitive and, at the same time, responsible and accountable for their actions. After a victory, they can carry themselves with dignity, holding heads high and firm hands out to shake with the opposition. If they lose, they should act in exactly the same manner. Whatever the outcome of a game, players have an obligation to themselves, as well as their parents, teammates, coaches, referees, fans, schools or leagues, sponsors, and opponents, to behave appropriately.

Good competitors play hard; throughout the game, they show respect for all participants, and after the game, they shake hands with the opposition. There should be no taunting, bad-mouthing, or cursing. No complaining to or about referees. No orchestrated mugging for the camera or crowd. It's a sad state of affairs when we are surprised to see good sportsmanship out on the field. What does that say about the character of our athletes?



GOOD SPORTSMANSHIP IS REACTING TO A CRITICAL SITUATION IN A manner that builds up yourself and your team in a positive way. Bad sportsmanship is an inability to cope with emotions brought out in a tough, stressful situation. Think about it. When kids haven't been taught to put winning and losing into proper perspective, and they consider every game a do-or-die situation, their competitiveness manifests as bad sportsmanship. Some of that is human nature; we all have the potential to become a knucklehead in a competitive situation. Unfortunately, too much of it is learned from coaches, parents, and peers.

If an attitude that fosters sportsmanship isn't found at home, it certainly won't be found in the kid. Savvy parents know that focusing only on winning teaches their kids the wrong lessons about sports. But if the emphasis is not on winning, what is it on? Too few parents have consciously prioritized what they *should* emphasize in order to teach their kids the *right* lessons. Even if they refrain from emphasizing winning, many parents insist that their child be made a starter or get more playing time, and they criticize the coach when that doesn't happen. Far too few support the coach if they don't agree with his methodology.

It's important to step back and make a realistic appraisal of your child's abilities and your attitude. Remember that there are many ways to win, and a coach's methodology often depends on the players he is working with in a particular season. The game plan that is best for the team this year may not yield as much playing time for your child as you would like. Instead of criticizing the coach's decision, encourage your youngster to maintain a good attitude. By telling their child, "You should be playing more, but the coach doesn't like you and is being unfair," parents give their child a crutch — "When something happens that I don't like, it's not my fault and it's not fair" — that, if not corrected, will become a habit for the rest of his life.

When a young athlete comes home from a game, the first questions that come out of a parent's mouth are what the child will assume are the most important. What are the first three questions a parent should ask?

1. Did you have fun?
2. What do you remember about the game?
3. Now what are you going to work on?

What are the first three questions a parent will be tempted to ask first but should save for later?

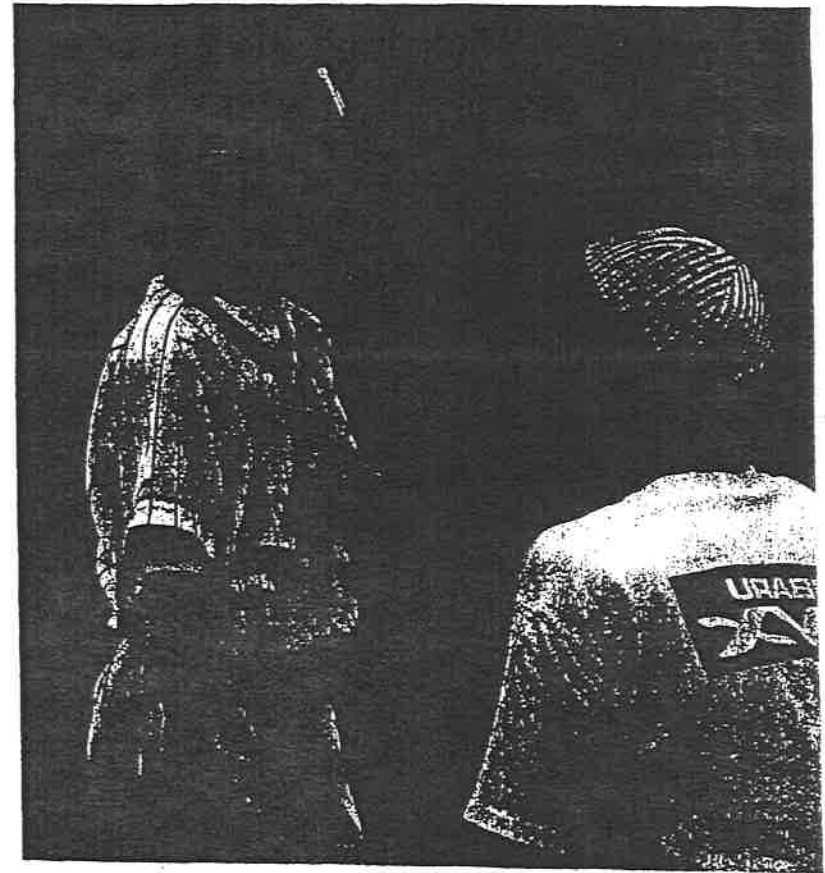
1. Did you win?
2. How did you play?
3. How much did your coach play you?

These two sets of questions send very different messages to the child, and the order in which they are asked tells a lot about the people who ask them. So pay attention to what you say, Mom and Dad. Your children are listening.

I HEARD SOMEONE SAY, "CHARACTER IS WHAT WE ARE WHEN NO one is looking." With my players I take it further, telling them, "Character is what you are when I am not looking." On my teams, I want *people of character*, not *characters*. What is it to have character? People of character have a good work ethic, are willing to sacrifice as an individual for the good of a group, compete hard but at all times exhibit good sportsmanship and integrity, and feel proud but humble in both victory and defeat. And that's just the beginning.

Character-building can be one of the primary goals of sports. Athletes who must work hard day after day to achieve personal and team goals can really learn the value of character. As one of my coaches once told me, "Character is perseverance after the initial excitement has worn off." This statement hit home for me, because I, as a player and a coach, have always held a strong belief in the importance of practice. At the first day of practice, everyone is there early, and they're pleading, "Let's go, let's go!" A couple of days later, they kind of drag in. When you've been through ten two-hour practices, your legs are dead, your back aches, you have a pulled hamstring muscle, and you worry that you're losing your position because you're not shooting well. But you know you have to keep going because that's the only way to improve. As one of my players said, "Character is crashing through the quitting point."

Going against conventional wisdom, the late famed sports-writer Heywood Hale Broun contended, "Sports doesn't build character; it reveals it." Former UCLA coach John Wooden agreed, saying that teachers and parents are the only people who can help build a child's character. Well, I think coaches are



teachers — Wooden definitely was — and I believe that sports both reveals *and* builds character. I have seen so many instances in which participation in sports has benefited a young athlete in significant character-building ways. The younger the child is, the better the chance of this happening. In fact, the most formative years for kids involved in athletics are from the time they're knee-high to the age of twelve or thirteen. Even so, it's never too late. I've seen many college players unlearn poor lessons they had absorbed at an early age and develop good character and sportsmanship, even in their early twenties.

For example, in the late 1980s I had a player named Bill Melchioni whose father had been an All-American at Villanova and played with the 76ers and the Nets. Bill visited our campus as a high-schooler, and afterward one of the players he met told me, "Don't recruit Bill. He's not a good fit here. He won't do what we do, and he won't work as hard as we want." Having gotten one thumbs-down, I called the kid who had hosted Bill during his stay and asked what he thought. He said, "Coach, I think you should recruit Bill. His main problem is just that he's

No game is won or lost on just one play.

young." I respected both kids' opinions, but I went along with the second one because there was something about Bill that I liked. Indeed, he was undisciplined and had a spotty work ethic. Although he always played hard in games, he didn't practice hard. In fact, once I turned around in practice only to see him trying to drop-kick the ball into the basket. While Bill wasn't someone who cheated or was a bad sport, there was an edge to the way he competed. I would urge him to pull back, and I, my coaches, and our players inundated him with our ideas on what he needed to do and how he needed to think in order to fit into our program. Bill was a quality kid, and with our encouragement he continued to develop a very strong sense of sportsmanship and character. He really blossomed as a junior and developed into a team leader. He ended up being a two-time All-Conference player and a life-long friend who still is clearly proud of the lessons he learned in our program.

For sports to build character, coaches must teach core values that will hold true in all aspects of life, and parents must support them. Every team — youth, high school, college,

or even professional — should have clearly stated core values that are intrinsic to its program. For instance, being on time was always an issue on my teams. If I was going to get only fifteen hours a week with my student-athletes, it was important that they showed respect to all their coaches and teammates by being on time. If a core value on a youth team is looking presentable, then parents should make sure that their kid tucks in his shirt and keeps his shoes tied.

A coach's core values have to be real or the kids won't buy into them. "Do as I say, not as I do" will never hold water with a young athlete. Youth, high school, and college coaches must be accountable to their players, so they'd better believe in — and live — the core values they teach. They would never again have the respect of their players if their kids saw them not following their own rules of conduct. If a coach tells his kids to be on time, to work hard, and to look each other in the eye when they speak to one another, the coach should do exactly that. If players are ready to start practice at 4:00 P.M., the coach shouldn't turn up at 4:05. If he tells his kids not to lose their tempers, then he must hold his in check as well.



IN MY FIRST YEAR OF COACHING AT WILLIAMS, I HAD A VERY GOOD player whom I respected except in one regard, which I discovered pretty quickly. We won our second game of the season by twenty points, but afterward he was in the shower crying. And I'm thinking, "Did we lose by twenty?" No, he was just upset because he played only half the game in the blowout and didn't score as many points as he'd hoped. Clearly he was someone who had always been asked the instant he got home,

"How many points did you score?" He had to learn to be a good teammate. When his team is that far ahead, he should be happy that all the kids who are busting their rear ends every day in practice get a chance to play.

It was my father who taught me the core value of exhibiting good sportsmanship toward my own teammates. When I was a teenager, I played Babe Ruth baseball. One day I wasn't starting, so I was sitting in the dugout doing the old legs-out, feet-crossed, hat-over-the-eyes routine. My father tapped on the side of the dugout and said sternly, "Get in the car." I went with him and soon found out why he was perturbed with me. He said, "Harry, if you're going to play on that team, you're going to look out at the field and root for your teammates." All I could do was gulp. He continued, "You decide whether you're going to go to the next game or not, because I am not going to watch you act like that. It's not right." I was thirteen or fourteen at the time, and I have never forgotten that incident. My father's words spoke volumes to me about the connection between being a good teammate and having character. Sometimes you simply have to swallow your pride and support the other guys.



YOUNG PLAYERS OFTEN HAVE TEMPER TANTRUMS WHEN THEY don't come through in a clutch situation, have a call go against them, or encounter something else that doesn't go their way, even in practice. Some youngsters simply haven't learned to control themselves during times of emotional stress. For others, temper tantrums are a way to get attention. Parents can help their kids deal with temper by emphasizing

that good sportsmanship includes controlling negative emotions and teaching them to view the court, field, or rink as a classroom. Then their demeanor will be more civil, and real learning will take place.

It's not difficult for a coach to control an athlete's temper. You simply say, "You're going to sit down now, and you'll go back in when I think you're ready. If you go back in and have another temper tantrum, you will sit down again." At some point, the player will say to himself, "Gee, every time I blow my lid, I don't play." This simple technique is incredibly effective. It works best if you warn your kids throughout the season that you will remove them from the game if they act inappropriately. Of course, once you set such a rule, you have to follow through with it in all circumstances, even if the kid throwing the tantrum is the star of your team and you're trailing by one point with ten seconds left. Otherwise you're delivering an incredibly bad message to him and all his teammates.

It's really important for coaches — youth-league coaches, especially — to think this through ahead of time. A competitive game can bring out a lot of emotions in a young athlete, and you have to be prepared to handle them. If a kid blows up and you aren't prepared, chances are that you will react angrily, when it's a time to teach instead. Then the young boy or girl will go home thinking, "My coach doesn't like me," instead of being on the road to learning to control temper and show good sportsmanship.

Good sportsmanship is reacting to a critical situation in a manner that builds up yourself and your team in a positive way.

If you're the parent of a kid who throws tantrums during games or practices, it's important that you work together with the coach to help your child. At home, use goal-setting techniques. Make keeping his cool and being a good encourager of his teammates your child's goals, and talk with him about them

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before every game or practice. Tell your kid's coach about these new goals, and ask him to pull the kid from the game or practice if he does throw a tantrum, and not to put him back in until he regains control of himself.

Temperamental kids (who are much different from high-spirited kids) can be very hard to handle. I've had kids at my basketball camps who have been nightmares. Then I'd see their dads play in a senior men's league game — oh, my gosh! The apple doesn't fall far from the tree. In

many cases, when I meet the parents, I realize why the kid was so difficult to work with. Of course, I've also seen many players who really have it together, and almost without exception, their parents have it together, too.

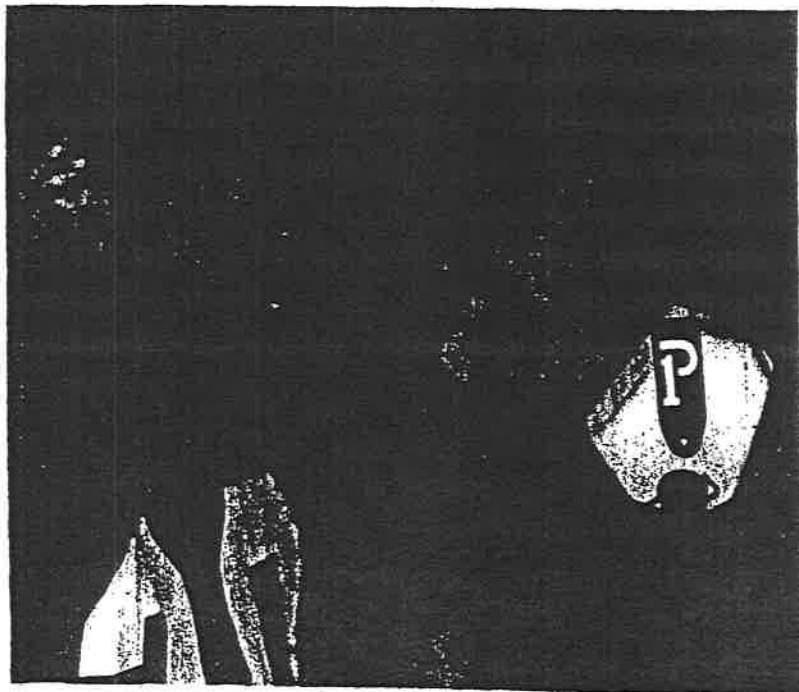
Recently I read a news story about the aftermath of an all-star soccer game. The father of one of the kids pushed one of the young players on the opposing team, a fourteen-year-old who was, allegedly, taunting the parents of the other team. When the father retaliated, it led to an all-out brawl all over the field. Think about how absurd that is. When an adult feels that he should push a fourteen-year-old who's been taunting him, then we as a society have lost — that's the definition of losing right there. We have lost our sense of civility, of what is

right and what is wrong. And this stuff happens every day! If adults don't act like adults, is it fair that we expect our kids to learn about character and sportsmanship from us?

It's shocking to me how often we hear of violent situations involving parents, youngsters, and referees. Referees have to endure frightening abuse, including insults, threats, and even physical violence. I've seen some games in which I think the referees would be justified to sue for harassment and abuse. And I'm disgusted at the language used by coaches, kids, and parents, even at Little League games. My dad once happened to hear something pop out of my mouth that shouldn't have. He said, "Harry, I have to tell you, profanity is a small mind struggling to express itself." That lesson stuck with me. I do not allow profanity on the court, at any time, and neither should any coach or parent.

The sportsmanship of fans at all levels is of great concern. Some of the good-natured razzing that comes out of the stands from kids is creative and funny, but too much is shockingly mean-spirited. Remember that despicable incident a few years ago when fans of a rival school taunted University of Arizona player Steve Kerr about the recent killing of his father? Our country values free speech, but the right to free speech doesn't justify abusive behavior. Just because you have the right to do something doesn't mean that it's the right thing to do. Fans have as much obligation as the players to behave with character. I'm glad that the Pac-10 conference, to which Arizona belongs, is now running a sportsmanship program for its member schools.

Another worrisome form of bad sportsmanship is sulking on the part of players and coaches when they feel they are the



victims of bad calls. Officials cannot possibly be perfect, any more than players can, and they *will* make bad calls. It's particularly hard for youngsters to accept this, especially when those bad calls come at critical moments in a game. But all players, parents, and coaches should understand that no game is won or lost on just one play and that the first possession is every bit as important as the last possession. Don't blame the officials for a loss. I can't remember one game a referee cost me in seventeen years. We all have had bad calls go against us, but as coaches and players we often don't recognize when we've gotten the breaks at other times. A great example is the time my team had three or four calls in a row against us, and an assistant coach griped, "We're just getting robbed by the referees tonight!" I checked our statistics, then asked, "Coach,

do you realize that we've taken thirty-four free throws tonight, and the other team has taken only nine?"

If a team is having trouble on the scoreboard, it's natural to look for a reason other than its own play. Therefore, it's vital that coaches and parents reinforce in young players the idea that referees are never responsible for losses. Players must be taught to accept responsibility for bad outcomes just as they take credit for good outcomes.

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THERE ARE MANY VARIABLES IN THE AREA OF SPORTSMANSHIP: coaches, teammates, parents, opponents, fans, and so on. There are so many places where it can go bad. With parents and peers giving young kids little reason to think in terms of good sportsmanship, it is often up to the coaches. However, many coaches also let down the kids; many could themselves use a class in sportsmanship. Coaches run up scores, sometimes to let a player reach a milestone like scoring fifty or even one hundred points in a game. They yell at players not only on their own team but also on the opposing team, even when they are on the free throw line, in the batter's box, or lining up penalty kicks or field goal attempts. Worst of all, some employ unethical means to score and win.

I recall the time Dick Farley, the football coach at Williams College, was upset after losing a game 7-0 on a play that was technically legal but somewhat unethical. The opposing coach had devised a pass play in which the receiver hid near the sidelines, arms folded and eyes directed to the side, acting like he wasn't even in the game. When the ball was hiked, he suddenly darted into the end zone unguarded and caught the game-win-

ning pass. The play was very underhanded, but the most important thing to me was what the ninety kids on the two teams felt about how the outcome of the game was decided. Is that how we want to teach our players to succeed?

In one basketball game that I remember well, my team committed a foul on a poor free throw shooter, but the referee called out the wrong jersey number, and the opposing coach allowed a

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better shooter to be sent to the line. To this day I don't know if the coach knew what he did, but I did say something about it to him after the game. If the kids on his team knew it and said nothing to him, it was just as wrong. I told my players, "Guys, we won the game and I feel great about it, but let's go over something that happened that I don't want us to be involved in.

They sent the wrong free throw shooter to the line, possibly because he was better than the kid who was fouled. There is a school of thought out there that thinks that what they did was cute and clever. I do not. If they did it on purpose, that's cheating, and that is something we as a team will never do."

What if the situation were reversed and we were the team to benefit? I would say the same thing. In one NCAA tournament game at Springfield College, the referee was going to send our star Michael Nogelo to the free throw line. I yelled to the referee that it wasn't Michael who was fouled but another player, who was a worse foul shooter. I didn't want to win that way, and I didn't want Michael to think that I knew it was another player who had been fouled yet didn't try to do something about it. The bottom line: If we lose the game because we didn't switch free throw shooters illegally, then we should lose the game.

In another game, the officials were going to let Michael shoot free throws after a non-shooting foul, but I told them that he shouldn't be sent to the line because we weren't yet in a one-and-one situation. Such things make an impression. My players thought that I did exactly the right thing by pointing out the mistake. It's not that I wanted them to think of me as "Mr. Character," but I wanted to represent to them the consistent core values of our program. I didn't want someone on the bench to be contemplating, "I wonder what Coach is going to do this time. Because sometimes he will do this and other times he will do that. . . . If we're up twenty points late in the game, he wouldn't bother, but if we were tied, he might. . . ." I wanted my kids to know exactly what I'd do, no matter the circumstance — and what I would expect them to do in my place.

When I send my players out into the world, I want them to think back on their sports experiences when they get into a sticky situation with a lot of ethical gray areas. I want them to know how I would react in their place and how I hope they would react. And I want them to know that there is a group of people out there — their former teammates — who think that's the right way to do it. At that crucial moment I want them to reveal, through their decisions and actions, the sterling character that together we helped develop years ago in our basketball program. Because character never hibernates. It builds and builds until it becomes a way of life.