



Keeping sports in perspective not always easy

Sunday, March 5, 2006

By **SHEILA G. MILLER**

At a girls varsity basketball game between Hawthorne and Immaculate Conception earlier this season, a particularly close matchup ended in a series of questionable calls and non-calls by officials. After the game, the referees were escorted from the building by a member of the school's athletic staff amid jeers and taunts.

A week or two after that game, some parents at a girls basketball game yelled slurs about a player on the opposing team, calling her "a beast," "a monster," and a few things that can't be repeated in a family newspaper. And the refs certainly weren't safe from criticism either.

Media reports of similar incidents suggest that this kind of behavior is happening all around the nation. And while the parents' sideline antics are nothing new, there is some concern that the behavior on the sidelines is becoming more objectionable and occurring more often.

A 1999 survey of 500 adults by the National Alliance for Youth Sports found that 82 percent believed adults acted aggressively at youth sporting events, while 56 percent had seen aggressive behavior by adults at youth sporting events.

There is little hard evidence to document whether parents' behavior at sporting events has increased in severity, but those who have been around youth and high school sports believe it has.

"There is no question that it has gotten worse. There is no question that parents have become much more vocal," said John McCarthy, a retired West Orange high school teacher who coached various sports at every level from freshman to semi-professional.

McCarthy, who now assists in a sports psychology class at Montclair State University and often gives coaching presentations for the NJSIAA, said he thinks the upshift in unruly behavior is due to changes in the world around us -- national and international events that create a feeling of tension and helplessness, a more critical citizenry with a sense of entitlement, and a media that provides so much sports information that fans begin to feel like experts.

If that opinion sounds too in-depth for you, try this theory. Steve King, an Eastern Christian girls basketball coach and athletic director for 31 years, hasn't seen much change in the level of parental sideline behavior.

"They have always been vocal," he said. "Fans will always be fans, and parents will always be parents."

What has changed, he said, is that parents are more involved in the sports, and therefore feel more comfortable criticizing the decisions made by coaches.

"Everybody's an expert," King said. "Especially for high school coaches, it can be difficult to coach, because everybody has the right answer."

Much of this, King said, stems from the increased pressure that parents place on a child to specialize in one sport and to succeed because of the lure of the Division I scholarship. And that can backfire.

"Trainers are starting to see injuries occur in kids that in the past would not have happened," he said. "There is burnout occurring, where they get into high school and in their sophomore year they're dropping out of sports."

Between parents' aggressive sideline behavior and their increased pressure on kids to perform at the highest levels, many towns around the United States have now started requiring education programs for parents who sign their kids up for sports. One such program, Parents Alliance for Youth Sports (PAYS), has been used nationwide and among other things includes a conduct and ethics code for parents.

The National Youth Sports Safety Foundation also publishes a parent's code of conduct, which doesn't specifically state that parents should not assault officials or coaches. Perhaps it should.

A 2002 report by the National Association of Sports Officials stated that attacks on sports officials by parents were on the rise. As a result, a number of states have created laws to deal with the violence. New Jersey protects sports officials under the same statute that protects civil servants, such as firefighters and police officers. Overall, 16 states have some sort of law or bylaw protecting referees from assault. Others are in the process of enacting such laws.

Two exceptional cases of parents behaving badly created a lot of buzz about the issue. In 2000, a Massachusetts hockey father beat another father to death over their 10-year-olds' team practice. He was sentenced to six to 10 years. And in 2005, a Texas father shot his son's high school football coach, upset over the way his son was treated by the coach and team. The coach survived the attack, and the father was sentenced to 20 years in prison.

These are unusually violent incidents, yes. But more commonplace sports parent act-outs are now documented on cable television shows. On Bravo last year, a reality show called "Sports Kids Moms and Dads" depicted children whose parents push them to be the best, no matter what the cost. New to Lifetime this spring is a reality series called "Cheerleading Nation," depicting the relationship between girls who compete on a national champion cheerleading team and the mothers who push them.

McCarthy advises coaches to take a hard line with parents.

"Coaches have to be accessible, and I think that the best way with the technology we have now is through email," he said, explaining that the interaction will therefore not be face-to-face, and will have a cooling-off period.

"The other thing I've always done is once I've picked a team, I've had parents in for practice and I let them watch what we're doing so they can be better fans because they understand the game a little more and know what we're trying to do."

All good advice. But in the meantime, there's nothing quite like watching parents yell insults at teenage girls to put things in perspective. When that happens, it's the parents who are the monsters, not the athletes on the court.

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