

Your Personal Coach

By

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In an effort to become a more interesting conversationalist with many of my friends, I've made a New Year's resolution to become a better sports fan. In the past when a friend began a dinner conversation with "How about those Conference playoffs?" I could only mumble "Huh? Please pass the salt." Now I can respond from a knowledge base earned with more than eight hours of sports TV over just this past weekend. Yes, I'm ready for some football! No longer content to sit on the sidelines, I can now hold my own with the best of them in sports talk. "Well, it's clear that the Steelers are taking the Bus (his parents are adorable) home to Detroit with a well deserved win over the Denver Broncos. It's not a mystery that the Carolina Panthers lost out when Seattle (and their deafening "12th Man") prevented Carolina from running the ball and helped quarterback Jake Delhomme to three interceptions while holding wide receiver Steve Smith to a total of thirty-three offensive yards (including a fumble in the last minute and a half). All that while the NFL's MVP Shaun Alexander had 132 yards. So it will be Seattle and Pittsburgh in Super Bowl XL. Please pass the salt."

When I look at how much I've learned about sports in only a few short weeks, I can't help but wonder just what younger people – with their wide-open and absorbent minds – learn from collegiate and professional sports. After only a short career as a sports-watching TV fan, I'm afraid, very afraid. From billboards that stress winning at any cost – "You didn't win the Silver. You lost the Gold" -- to adult athletes, who seem to have no comprehension of fair play, I wonder about the long-term effects on my integrity and values by becoming a better sports fan. Consider just a few recent examples: Marcus Vick of Virginia Tech at the Gator Bowl deliberately stomps on his opponent's leg while he's down (as a graduate of Virginia Tech, I'm appalled and ashamed), Sean Taylor of the Washington Redskins spits in the face of Tampa Bay's Michael Pittman (at least he was bounced from the game as Vick should have been), and competitive skier Bode Miller -- in a weird moment of machismo – brags about approaching the giant slalom while "wasted" (apparently intelligence is not a requirement for alpine skiing).

Throughout the seasons, we sports fans routinely watch as Major League Baseball coaches leap from dugouts to angrily kick dirt on the shoes of umpires, NBA players dash into the stands to pound drunken fans, and hockey players regularly re-enact brutish scenes as if they are extras in "Braveheart." What do these role models demonstrate to young athletes and sports fans? Do professional attitudes of win at any cost, uncontrolled egoism, unnecessary aggression, and dirty tricks trickle down to younger athletes? I'm afraid so.

A 2004 study conducted with more than 4200 high school athletes by the non-profit Josephson Institute of Ethics revealed some chilling conclusions about the state of sportsmanship among U.S. High School students. Although sports can teach positive values and build character, in many cases, young athletes – especially males – simply learn to cheat, engage in improper gamesmanship, and indulge in excessive violence. The results of the survey show that parents and coaches are simply not doing enough to teach the meaning of fair play, sportsmanship, and honorable competition. The Institute's president, Michael Josephson sums up the results by saying, "It appears that today's playing fields are the breeding grounds for the next generation of corporate pirates and political scoundrels." Some key findings:

1. Girls are more sportsmanlike than boys. Perhaps this finding results from the fact that girls have better role models. I can't remember the last time I saw fisticuffs at an Old Dominion-Tennessee women's basketball game, Mia Hamm slam a teammate with a soccer ball, or Michelle Wie trip up a competitor with her putter.

2. Coaches don't always set a good example. Large numbers of male athletes endorse questionable actions of coaching including: arguing with an official intending to intimidate, instructing players how to illegally hold and push opponents without getting caught, using a stolen playbook, instructing a player to fake an injury to get a needed extra time out, ordering a pitcher to throw at an opposing hitter in retaliation after a key player was hit by a pitch, swearing at an official to get thrown out of a game in order to get the team worked up, and using profanity and insults to motivate players.

3. Many high school athletes break rules and engage in unsporting conduct. A high percentage of male respondents think it is proper to deliberately inflict pain in football in order to intimidate, trash talk a defender after every score, soak a football field to slow down an opponent, throw at a batter who homered last time up, or illegally alter a hockey stick.

4. Cynical attitudes about success. Nearly half of the male athletes agreed that people who break the rules are more likely to succeed, successful people do what they have to do to win even if others consider it cheating, and a person has to lie or cheat sometimes in order to succeed.

5. Winning is more important than sportsmanship. Almost 40% of males – versus only 15% of the females – agreed that when all is said and done it is more important to win than be considered a good sport.

As an antidote to some of the bad news about sports and values, the Institute for International Sport at the University of Rhode Island will celebrate the 16th National Sportsmanship Day -- "Dare to Play Fair" – on March 7, 2006. Students from elementary, middle, high school, and college are invited to write essays of 500 words or less that address any aspect of ethics and sportsmanship in society or share a personal reflection of exemplary or poor sportsmanship they have seen or experienced. USA Today will report the winning essays as part of National Sportsmanship Day and essays will be available to be read in their entirety at www.sports.usatoday.com. The deadline for receiving essays is February 24. Essays may be faxed to 401-874-2429, e-mailed to nsd@internationalsport.com, or snail mailed to:

USA Today Essay Contest
Institute for International Sport
University of Rhode Island
P.O. Box 1710
Kingstown, RI 02881-1710

For more information about National Sportsmanship Day and the essay contest, go to www.internationalsport.com/nsd.

As a newly minted sports fan, I'm extending a personal invitation to all local students to participate in this essay contest. You just might help me keep my New Year's resolution.

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2006 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) Columns are archived at www.fullpotentialliving.com.