

SPORTSMANSHIP - IN SUN AND SHADOW

by Gary Williamson, NTSSA State Coach

"Sportsmanship is defined as a person who plays with fairness, courteous relations and graceful acceptance of results at the end of a contest."

Sportsmanship is not just about being a nice person; it is much more important than that....It's about character.

Sportsmanship deals with the behavior of coaches, players, and spectators. First and foremost young people need guidance in becoming a great person before they think of themselves as a great soccer player.

Most adults are conscientious of their role, as they strive to be a good role model. And yet, it is amazing what some adults "reveal" about their character when it comes to their behavior in youth soccer. Some examples:

- A team of 9 year olds loses a soccer game in the last few minutes after the goalkeeper lets the ball slip between his legs. One of the dads on the losing team shouts, loud enough for the coach and goalkeeper to hear "We would have won if the coach played the best goalie the whole game. Everybody knows he can't catch the ball. Why did the coach put him out there with everything on the line?"
- On the loss of a game in State Cup bracket play a father comments I'm so angry I could spit!"
- A mother of a girls soccer team that won 5-0 in a tournament for 12 year olds, in full earshot of the parents of the losing team: "I guess that team has never seen a good soccer team before. I can't believe their coach entered them in this tournament. Oh, well maybe it taught them not to come to this level of a tournament until they are ready."
- A father slaps his daughter across the face after she is substituted by the coach for a lack of effort.
- At a game in Arlington a 9yr old player has his jaw broken as he is slugged in the face by an opponent.
- At an U9 girls soccer game in Richland Hills the coach is heard yelling "If you can't get the ball knock them down!"
- A team of 11 year olds refuses to appear at the awards tent to collect their runners up medals. After being berated by their coach the boys were having difficulty with the result. Rather than be concerned or appalled, the parent's of these young boys accepted their son's unsportsmanlike behavior in stride.
- An adult coach physically assaults a 16yr old referee.

Why do some adults lose it at youth soccer games? Sports psychologist Thomas Tutko and others feel that parents get too wrapped up in the competition because they are living vicariously through their children. Other experts feel that parents might be filled with unrealistic expectations, hoping their child will be the next superstar. Consequently, they place too much emphasis on making sure their child "wins' or "looks good."

20 million youngsters play in recreational soccer leagues throughout the USA, the signs of a decline in sportsmanship are evident: talking trash, challenging officials, refusing to shake hands with the opponent after the game, making excuses after every loss – players, parents and coaches.

Most people agree that teaching skills, rules, and strategies of soccer are among the primary responsibilities of youth coaches. Of significant importance is the physical conditioning of the players, promoting enjoyment of the game, and attempting to avoid physical and psychological injury are also outcomes they should strive to achieve.

Good sportsmanship has to be taught.....

It is the responsibility of adult leaders to teach good sportsmanship. As the leader, teacher, motivator and organizer the coach must communicate clearly with their players.

The really outstanding coaches engage their players in a quest to be the best—both on and off the field. The best they can be toward coaches, opponents, teammates, officials, and the game itself.

A coach, who does not inspire their players to strive for a higher standard both in play and behavior, may as well choose another hobby. They may coach soccer but they will never coach players.....At least not really well.

Competition is important, but winning and losing should be secondary to participating. We should not let the desire to win sacrifice a commitment to sportsmanship and fair play. Associations, clubs, teams and adult leaders who honor and reward good behavior and the ability to set the right example are on the correct path in developing character in young people. And character defines the person.