

Promoting Positive

SPECTATOR BEHAVIOR



How can Adventist schools teach and enforce appropriate spectator behavior at athletic events when bad behavior seems to be the norm for professional and amateur sports?

On March 31, 2011, San Francisco Giants fan Bryan Stow, a 42-year-old paramedic and father of two, suffered brain injuries from a savage beating in a parking lot outside Dodger Stadium in Los Angeles by two men in Dodgers gear, following a baseball game between the rival teams.

Six spectators were wounded when a gunman opened fire during half-time at an adult basketball league playoff game in Philadelphia on August 22, 2011.

When traveling with his team, Barry Bonds, a high-scoring professional baseball player, was accused of steroid use and faced booing crowds, some of them throwing syringes.

Football (soccer) hooliganism, or unruly behavior by association football club fans, ranges from shouts and small-scale fistfights and disturbances to brawls, vandalism, and intimidat-

tion, and even huge riots that result in hooligans, police, and bystanders being killed, and riot police having to intervene with tear gas, armored vehicles, and water cannons. Wikipedia has documented football hooliganism in 45 countries in Europe, Great Britain, Asia, North and South America, and Australia.¹

Media reports and the sports pages of national and regional newspapers regularly feature headlines that describe out-of-control fans causing injuries and even death. It takes just one enraged fan's reckless or violent act to start a stampede or a riot that results in others being injured or killed. These tragedies occur throughout the world during baseball, cricket, soccer, and hockey games—and even children's sports events.

Every sport has rules and regulations governing play, but appropriate behaviors, attitudes, and manners are more difficult to codify. Yet some standards of behavior are universally assumed. "Following the rules" probably tops the list. Fair play is expected. Teamwork is valued. Generally, coaches encourage players to behave civilly in both victory and defeat, though

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some have failed to model these principles themselves. Certainly within the Christian community, these values should be embraced and practiced, for they parallel the Golden Rule.

Unfortunately, most of these principles and guidelines have been developed for the *players* of various sports. Despite recurring reports of wild, dangerous, and occasionally deadly behavior by spectators, little is said or written concerning appropriate spectator behavior. The subject needs to be addressed by sports enthusiasts in general, and by Seventh-day Adventists in particular. Our educational administrators and boards must develop and maintain guidelines outlining the type of day-to-day behavior expected by those who represent Christ. Kindness, self-control, and courtesy should mark the behavior of Christians whether at a sporting event or in church.

Because sport plays a significant role in modern society, it should be discussed in Adventist classrooms, gymnasiums, and playing fields. The wholistic philosophy of Adventist education, which encompasses the entire school program—both curricular and co-curricular—challenges young people to embrace and embody high standards throughout their lives, so it is imperative that students learn that the same principles apply on the sporting field as in all other areas of life. Coaches and athletic directors must endeavor to instill the highest standards and demand appropriate behavior in class and on the playing field. But what can they do about spectators?

Answers to that question become increasingly important as one considers recent spectator behavior like that described at the beginning of this article. It is small wonder that children growing up watching televised accounts of unbecoming spectator behavior (and the above incidents are beyond “unbecoming”) unconsciously absorb the same careless attitude toward their own behavior. Booing seems like the normal thing to do, and throwing objects at opponents seems excusable. Children watching this sort of behavior grow up to become tomorrow’s spectators; and it falls to Seventh-day Adventist educators, particularly coaches and athletic directors, to counteract today’s tolerance of offensive, often dangerous, spectator conduct.

Codifying Good Sportsmanship

So how do we define proper behavior for Seventh-day Adventist spectators, and how can our institutions promote and ensure acceptable behavior at sporting events? (Similar policies would be applicable to cultural events, programs, and lectures.) Several schools have developed comprehensive statements addressing this and similar questions for coaches, athletes, and spectators through sportsmanship codes. Basic to such documents is respect for every human being. Visiting teams and officials deserve to be treated as guests. One does not verbally irritate or abuse guests, much less attack them physically—either directly or indirectly. Guests, too, are to behave civilly and are affirmed for their good behavior. In sports, this means that fans should applaud a good play and good sportsmanship and, with the players, demonstrate

grace and courtesy under pressure.

One does expect that spectators will cheer for their favorite team. That has always been an integral part of sports. But favoring one team does not entitle spectators to insult the competing team or its players and coach. Certainly the denigration of any person or group is inconsistent with Christ’s words to “do to others as you would have them do to you” (Matthew 7:12, NRSV)² within the context of the event. In fact, those words define the ideal behavior of Christian athletes and spectators in every area of life.

As a student athlete, I enjoyed playing at home and with my school basketball team. I loved to hear the songs, chants of “Defense, Defense,” and the whole student body, parents, and other fans cheering for our team. Their enthusiasm gave me great doses of adrenaline and inspired me to do my best individually and as a member of the team. The better we played, the louder the cheers.

Away games, however, were different. I had a hard time concentrating because each time we played our biggest rival, fans for both schools would try to outdo one another by distracting the opposing players during free throws. Sometimes verbal altercations or even physical fights broke out during or after the game. Instead of healthy competitive relationships, the encounters produced active and mutual disdain.

As I look back on these experiences, I cannot recall that, as students, we were ever addressed regarding proper spectator behavior. Now, as an athletic coach myself, I have become acutely aware of the need for this kind of training.

Rules for Acceptable Spectator Behavior

Acceptable spectator behavior does vary from sport to sport. For example, spectators are expected to cheer throughout a basketball game, as are those attending hockey games. Hockey fans even throw their hats onto the ice after a player scores three goals in one game in celebration of the “hat trick.” The rules for spectator behavior in golf, however, are quite different. Spectators are required to maintain absolute silence while the golfer tees off. And during tennis matches, spectators are supposed to cheer only between rallies. During some sporting events, if patrons are too loud, they are addressed publicly, and if they continue their rowdiness, they are asked to leave the stadium.

Perhaps at this point it’s useful to remember that spectators are usually referred to as “fans,” a word derived from *fanatic*, which describes someone whose devotion to a cause, person, or issue is uncritical and marked by frenzied enthusiasm. That description hardly fits the Christian ideal of a person who, even in times of excitement, is rational, fair, and self-controlled. Yet sadly, one can often observe spectator behavior at games between parochial schools that could more aptly be termed “fanatical” than “Christian.”

The following scenario is far too typical: Bitter rivals square off on the basketball court. The game seesaws back and forth. The home crowd is waving banners, cheering for their team,

and booing the opponents. The visiting team steals the ball. A lone player runs down the court for a lay-up. Suddenly, a hand flies out of nowhere to block the shot. The crowd erupts in cheers and laughter. The referee blows his whistle and declares a foul. Then the crowd begins to boo the referee. The coach is upset and argues the call. The fouled opponent is sent to the free-throw line, and the first shot goes up amid screams and attempts by fans to distract the shooter. The ball circles the rim, then falls to the floor. The home crowd cheers.

As an adult and athletic director, I recognize the importance of cheering, but only in a way that is fair and wholesome. During a recent home basketball game against a local Christian school, someone in the crowd yelled inappropriate comments about our opponents. It offended the parents of the players and maligned our school's reputation. A letter of apology was written to the other school by our school's principal, and the basketball coach and athletic director addressed the student body at a general assembly, where he emphasized the importance of Christlike behavior, invoking the Golden Rule. He provided this useful guideline: It's appropriate to cheer and exhibit school spirit, but not to use foul language or to insult one's opponents.

Communicating Expectations

Prior to sporting events, athletic directors, coaches, and principals need to communicate with their students, athletes, and spectators about what behavior is expected. A concise list of rules should also be posted in the gymnasium or near the stadium entrances.

As athletic director, I want to promote a healthy and safe environment for both teams—and the referees and spectators! In too many incidents, “winning at all costs” comes first. The grace and beauty of the game are lost. I want our athletes and spectators to encourage one another and both teams—honoring excellent play whenever it occurs. The challenge is ongoing, but the repetition of principles and guidelines are the tools that make the task achievable.

The Seventh-day Adventist Health, Physical Education, Recreation Association (SDA-HPERA) in its *Guidelines for Seventh-day Adventist Athletics* has provided this statement regarding spectator conduct:

“Athletic competition is an important part of school life. Spectators participate in the movement experience vicariously, promote school spirit, and help to demonstrate the philosophy and dignity of their school. Spectators may positively contribute by helping to build the character of student-athletes and promote the reputation of the school. Spectators must reflect Christ-centered behavior in their conduct at all times.”³

Guidelines for Spectators

Obviously, educating spectators is the key to ensuring positive behavior at games and other events. If appropriate rules have been established and disseminated to help spectators un-

derstand the difference between acceptable and unacceptable behaviors, they will be aware of the expectations, and officials can enforce the rules to ensure safety and appropriate conduct.

Athletic directors and coaches can teach these guidelines in several ways. One way is to read or distribute a brief and positive statement of appropriate behavior before each game. Another way is to post signs around the spectator seating areas displaying the code of conduct for both players and fans. The code could include the following:

- Support the team in a positive way.
- Do not engage in negative or demeaning outbursts.
- Do not use noisemakers during a contest.
- Treat officials with respect at all times. Do not complain or argue about their calls during or after an athletic contest, or jeer or verbally attack their decisions.
 - Cheer appropriately, but do not attempt to distract opposing players when, for example, they are shooting free throws in basketball or serving in volleyball.
 - Treat all participants, officials, coaches, and spectators with respect.
 - Be gracious in victory and dignified in defeat.
 - Exhibit Christian behavior at all times.

Spectator behavior is influenced, usually subconsciously, by many components. The game itself, music, cheering squads, the announcer's commentary, and the behavior of athletes and coaches all play a role. And as has been noted, it can take just one unruly spectator to turn a game into a disaster, or a crowd into a mob. Conversely, if spectators applaud the efforts of both teams, cheering for the home team but recognizing the efforts of the opponent, the beauty of sports can be discerned, as well as the spirit of Christ who never indulged in derisive behavior.

Effects of Chants, Cheers, and Music

Thus, the athletic director or coach in a Seventh-day Adventist school must explain that organized cheers affect crowd behavior. They are meant to get fans excited and to energize the team. Chants of “Defense, Defense” and similar slogans can have either a positive or negative effect; they can encourage the home team or interfere with the opposing team's play. Thus, spectators need to be sensitive regarding the effect such chants may have and act with the same generosity of spirit they would wish to encounter were they playing.

The athletic director or coach must also explain that energy levels of crowds are affected by music, which is often used to “pump up” fans and players. Music that motivates the crowd is appropriate; music that distracts or seeks to humiliate or make it impossible for members of the other team to hear their coach's instructions is not appropriate or acceptable in a Christian setting.

The school administration or athletic director should also help students understand that the behavior and attitudes of athletes and coaches can greatly influence crowd behavior. If a coach is upset and argues a call with the officials, the crowd will

also get upset and frustrated with the officials. If players taunt the opposing team and “showboat” on the court, fans are more likely to sense this negative attitude and begin to heckle the opposing team. Appropriate penalties for inappropriate student behaviors, whether by fans or players at school-sponsored events, should be included in the student handbook.

Dealing With Crowd Noise

The athletic director or coach needs to make clear to students and spectators the effect of noise on players. It is common to see athletes attempting to raise the noise level at a game by turning to the spectators and pumping their arms up and down. The resulting racket may cause spectators to engage in hoots and boos if they have not made a commitment to demonstrate Christian courtesy at the event.

Not only can the principles of appropriate behavior be taught, but they can and should be modeled by athletic directors, coaches, teachers, parents, and school administrators. Self-control, courtesy, and generosity of spirit are fruits of the Spirit and thus expected behavior for all Christians, including players and fans at Seventh-day Adventist sports events. With careful attention to these principles, in time, it could actually be that student athletes and spectators will demonstrate through their behavior that Christianity and good sportsmanship are harmonious, not only in principle, but also in practice. Written guidelines, such as those created by the SDA-HPERA, can help everyone involved with sporting events to apply the Golden Rule. ✍

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leaders of our church. Thank you for your service!

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