



PART ONE

---

# **Thinking About Sportsmanship**

---

## CHAPTER 1

# Reflecting on Your Own Experience



© CLEO Photography

The unexamined life is not worth living.

—Plato, *Apology of Socrates*

The best place to start this process is with your own experience. We will ask you to allow your own experience—and your understanding of it—to be challenged, but we won't ask you to leave that experience behind. Most of you probably already attempt to instill the values of sportsmanship in your players. But how important is it in your coaching? Do your players exhibit sportsmanlike behavior? Do you?

## **A CHALLENGE TO REFLECT**

Here are some questions that might help you reflect on your own experience. Write out your answers.

1. Who are the coaches I most respect? Why do I respect them? What qualities do they have that I most admire?
2. How do I want to be remembered by my athletes? How will they think of me later in life? Will I have made some difference in their lives? Will they want their children to play for me?
3. Am I the kind of coach I would want my children to play for? If not, why?
4. Which of my former coaches do I most admire? Which of my former coaches do I least admire? Why?
5. Do I care most about being liked or being respected by my players? Do my players like me? Respect me? Neither? Both?

What do your answers show you about your own coaching? What do they indicate about how serious you are about sportsmanship and character? These questions are meant to challenge you to look squarely at your own sense of what really matters to you as a coach.

## **RESPECT STARTS WITH YOU**

Here are the personal reflections of one current coach about his own past experience:

*My American Legion baseball coach was one of the finest persons I've ever met. He never raised his voice. He was gentle but firm. I never saw him argue with an umpire. He treated every player with the utmost respect. He made us practice long and hard, but my impression was that all the players felt grateful to be coached by him. We all tried as hard as we could—for him.*

*If you messed up, especially if you made a mental error, one little glance from him was enough to make you realize how much you had let him and the team down. He never allowed us to yell at other players or rag the umpires. And other coaches and teams knew this. I saw umpires apologize to him for making bad calls. He taught us the values of respect, responsibility, team play, and effort. It's really hard to put into words what he meant to all of us. I would have tried to run through a brick wall for him, and I know I'm a better person because I played for him.*

Maybe we can't all be revered like this coach, but examples from your own experience probably show how much coaches can matter to players. Don't underestimate the extent to which players make judgments about their coaches. Because of your behavior, your players know that you approve of some things and disapprove of others. They know that you have certain values. What values are you conveying to your players? Answer the following questions honestly.

1. Do you allow your players to "talk trash" to opponents?
2. Do you allow your players to respond to an officiating call with angry displays of temper?
3. Do you let your players "showboat," or prance, after they do something positive?
4. Do you ever yell or scream at players?
5. If you do yell or scream at players, do you do it when they perform poorly or when they behave in an unsportsmanlike manner?
6. Would you allow your team to depart after a game without shaking the opponents' hands?
7. Have you ever blamed a loss on an official (especially when talking to your players after the game)?
8. Have you ever made excuses for losing a game?
9. Would you attempt to intimidate an official in order to get a favorable call in the future?
10. Would you get into a heated argument with an official in order to motivate your team?
11. Would you promote animosity between two teammates to motivate them?
12. Would you run up the score on a team for any reason?
13. Do you ever call your players names in a way that demeans them or publicly embarrasses them?
14. Do you treat your players differently after a loss than after a win?

15. Do you punish or reward your players as a result of whether the team won or lost a match or game, without regard for the effort they put out?

## THINKING ABOUT REASONS

Now take another step. Go back through the questions we just asked and ask yourself *why* you do or don't engage in these practices. If, for example, you do allow your players to talk trash to opponents, why? If you don't, why don't you? If you would run up the score on an opponent, why? If not, why not? And so on. Do you have good reasons for your answers? In other words, ask yourself not just what you *do* in your coaching, but what you think you *should* be doing. Go back through each of the questions and ask yourself, regardless of what you actually do, whether you condone or condemn the practice. And then ask yourself what reasons you have for each judgment.

If you're willing to reflect on the reasons behind your actions and attitudes—which means that you're willing to risk the possibility of admitting you're wrong if your reasons don't hold up—then we think you'll find the following chapters helpful. We won't tell you exactly how you ought to answer these questions. We will, however, articulate a set of principles in light of which you ought to address these questions. These principles may challenge the way you've answered them—at the very least this should be an opportunity to become more reflective about what you do. Or you may very well come away from this book with the same answers to these questions, but with a better understanding of the reasons behind your answers—and your actions.

## COMMON OBJECTIONS TO TEACHING SPORTSMANSHIP

We can imagine that some coaches might be skeptical about our emphasis on sportsmanship and “coaching for character.” It's not universally agreed that coaches have a responsibility to teach sportsmanship. Some of the objections are fairly prevalent, and we'd like to respond to them before we get underway. We'll let “Coach Skeptical,” a hypothetical character who will appear from time to time throughout the book, state the objections.

**Coach Skeptical:** Times have changed. Players and coaches act differently than they did in the past. Other successful coaches let their players trash talk or vent their emotions, so why shouldn't I? You just can't expect players to act like monks or nuns. Why can't coaches let players be themselves?

Times may have changed, but in a very important sense, the sports we coach and play have not. Just because more people today, in sport and in society at large, act in disrespectful and uncivil ways doesn't mean that we must judge such actions as acceptable. Instead of throwing up our hands and saying kids are different so we must coach them differently, we should ask ourselves whether in fact they are different because we've coached them—and in general educated them—differently. It may be that because there is such an emphasis on winning and being "Number One" we have forgotten the extent to which the language of sportsmanship has been central to the great athletic traditions. If unsportsmanlike behavior now seems to be the status quo, that doesn't mean that it has to be. It does mean that coaches have a huge responsibility to constantly teach, practice, and exemplify good sportsmanship. Someone must step forward and challenge the status quo. The truth of the matter is, sportsmanship doesn't restrict self-expression or require monkish behavior. There are good reasons for requiring players to be good sports, and people with good moral character are no less free to "express" themselves than are bad sports. They may simply do this differently.

**Coach Skeptical:** I'm paid to coach, not to be a parent, baby-sitter, or "moral educator," whatever that means. My job is to coach, not teach values. That's a job for families and churches, not coaches. If kids are less respectful nowadays, that's not my fault. I have to work with the hand I've been dealt.

You don't have any choice. You're a role model and a moral educator, whether you like it or not. The issue is not whether you, as a coach, choose to convey values; the issue is whether you choose to convey the values of *sportsmanship* and whether you make this teaching a conscious part of your coaching. Would you want your child to play for a coach who wants no part of teaching values? Wouldn't you want your child to be taught to respect others, love the game, be responsible, trustworthy, fair?

**Coach Skeptical:** Sports are about winning and losing. You don't learn lessons by losing. Winning is the point—period. That's what we should be teaching our children. Life is competitive. If you want to get ahead, you'd better be realistic about these things. Sports teach you to hate losing, to love winning, and to do whatever is necessary in order to win. If I have to intimidate opponents or officials to win, so be it. And if others don't, that's their problem. I'll win, and they'll lose. Sports teach you to make the other guy the loser.

First of all, in many, if not most, cases it's a mistake to think that teaching and requiring good sportsmanship from your players is inconsistent with the pursuit of victory. In fact, as we'll argue, not taking the pursuit of victory seriously is unsportsmanlike. There have been and continue to be fine coaches who demand both athletic excellence and moral excellence from their players. John Wooden is merely one example of a successful coach who insisted on character and integrity.

But, more importantly, the view that winning at all costs is what matters is based on a misunderstanding of sport and competition. In an interview for a *60 Minutes* segment on sportsmanship, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, whose ability to win certainly wasn't stifled by John Wooden's emphasis on sportsmanship, remarked:

*Our whole culture here in America has become a lot more vulgar. And I think it's not considered cool to be a good sportsman. You're considered square and soft. . . . There's the whole process of celebration that's gone beyond celebration. It's taunting. I pity the people who are doing this, because they really don't understand: Sports is a step away from the rule of the jungle, and they're trying to move it back towards the jungle, when the strong survive and misuse the weaker in any way that they want. And that's really unfortunate for our whole system of values in our country.*

## WRAP-UP

As we'll argue in chapter 2, teaching sportsmanship is not a matter of imposing standards of behavior that come from outside the arena of sport. What Kareem reminds us is that unsportsmanlike conduct is the result of misunderstanding the nature of sport. Unsportsmanlike conduct is conduct that is contrary to the nature of sport, and sportsmanlike conduct is conduct that is consistent with the nature of sport. Bad sportsmanship, then, is at least in part the result of bad understanding. To understand why Kareem would say that sport is a step away from the law of the jungle, we'll have to spend some time—pardon the sports metaphor—in the weight room and on the practice field of thinking. We'll have to think about the nature of sport. In this chapter you have begun the process of thinking about these difficult and important issues. But, mostly, we have challenged you with questions that have forced you to reflect on your own experience as a coach. Now we want to help you think, not just about your personal experience, but about the nature of the activity you're engaged in.