

You can observe a lot just by watching – Yogi Berra



Carla Nicholls, ChPC (left) who helped save the life of Nigerian Long Jumper, Comfort Chinelo Onyali (right), who suffered a seizure on the track in Delhi at the 2010 Commonwealth Games



Guide to Administrative Fair Play – Coaches, Sportsmanship and Administration

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The lessons and values of sportsmanship can be some of the most enduring aspects of sport. While sportsmanship can be difficult to define, Rudd, a professor at Florida State University, and Stoll¹, a professor at the University of Idaho, define it as individuals who “value athletic competition as a moral practice. That is, each athlete tacitly agrees to play respectfully, honestly, and fairly.” They go on to say that sportsmanship is also the practice of “generosity, amicability, and compassion toward one’s opponent”. Sportsmanship and fair play are exactly the sorts of qualities that one certainly hopes transcend to other aspects of life, but which are fundamentally important to pursue in a sport context. It is inconceivable to think that an athlete or a coach is not exposed to these ideas, on some level, throughout their careers.

The Sport Information Resource Centre (SIRC) provided the sport community with numerous resources on the subject in their July 2010 Newsletter². There were articles dedicated to the subject of sportsmanship and fair play from a variety of perspectives philosophically and from a variety of “on the field” perspectives such

as that of official, athlete, coach, and parent. Many of the articles dealt with ways in which those “on the field” groups can help contribute to sportsmanship. As an integral part of sport, coaches clearly play a role in teaching their athletes, as well as their own colleagues, about the values of sportsmanship and fair play. David Hoch³, the past President of the Maryland State Athletic Directors’ Association, states that sportsmanship is about respect, and that respect is a two-way street. What is interesting to note is that Hoch describes a situation in which a coach is asking for respect from his players, but not showing it himself. It is with reference to such context that he illustrates how respect is in fact a two-way street. The present article introduces a new perspective on the importance of this two-way respect, as it pertains to administrators, coaches, and other key decision-makers of the sport system.

The importance of sportsmanship seems obvious, but does it end on the field of play? None of the articles in the SIRC newsletter specifically addressed the need for administrators, from the club to the national

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level, to demonstrate those same sportsmanship and fair play values, at the administrative level, that are expected on the field of play. There seems to be a gap in the discussion of fair play at the administrative level, and this disconnect from the practice of administrative fair play may contribute to a lessening of those same values on the field of play.

So beyond the field of play behaviour calling for respect for the rules, respect for the opponents, respect for the officials, what does it mean for a coach to play fair? In their search for the key element that will give an edge to their athletes towards the ultimate performance, how many coaches look for ways in which they can take advantage of the inexistence of a rule or take advantage of a “weakness” in the rulebook? Have coaches you know ever “tested” the officials to see how far they would let them “bend” the rules?

Coaches are entrusted with a lot of power and authority when it comes down to team selection, to carding recommendations, to assignments of athletes to events, or to designate who gets to play in a game. Unfortunately, some of them breach their commitment to fair play when they agree to “bend the rules” so that the policy yields the results that were expected or hoped for by them or by the federation administrators at the outset of the policy development process.

When there are no officials to keep them in line, there is only one thing that will bring coaches to make those decisions “by the rules”: their belief in fair play as a central value of Canadian sport, their own conviction that “bending the rules” creates unfairness that is unacceptable in a healthy sport system. For coaches, respecting their commitment to fair play in sport also extends to how they make decisions that impact athletes in their sport and how they apply a policy the way that it was initially communicated to athletes.

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Stewart⁴, professor at Montana State University, writes that sportsmanship has the potential to teach important values, and that it can be “introduced and reinforced, but without careful examination of the athletic environment, neither parents nor coaches can ensure that the desired behaviours will be perpetuated or valued”. A sport organization’s administration is indeed part of this athletic environment. And so with this in mind, the SDRCC has created the “Guide to Administrative Fair Play” (Guide), a document that deals with some ways in which sport organizations’ leaders can act fairly towards their members and stakeholders. The behaviour espoused in the Guide begins to tie in the elements expected on the field of play and those that ought to appear at the administrative level, in the office



and in the boardroom. When asked for his opinion on the Guide, Canadian cycling coach and SDRCC Board member, Luc Arseneau, ChPC, declared that “Fair play is too often interpreted as something that should only happen on the field of play. This document fits very well with the new philosophy of sport in Canada where it should not only be athlete’s focused, coach driven, but also administratively supported. Fair play should touch all levels of our sport organizations.”

The Guide is set up as a checklist with a dozen points that the SDRCC feels should be taken into consideration, when organizations act, in order to prevent disputes. These points are further explored by asking several questions in regards to their application. The following are two examples of the topics explored in the document and how they may relate to coaches specifically:

Transparency & Accountability: In an effort to remain open, transparent and accountable, have we provided our member community (athletes, coaches, officials, volunteers, administrators and others), in advance and in clear, plain language, with all documents, policies, rules and regulations that apply to them?

A coach tells an athlete that a certain competition is necessary for selection to a team. The competition has been required for years. But next year, it’s to be replaced by a different mandatory competition. The coach realizes his mistake too late for his/her athlete to enter the new mandatory competition. The athlete is angry with the coach but also at the sport organization for changing the rule, and argues that the rule changes were not made public early enough for her to prepare her training program, and now she’s missed the closing date for the new mandatory and now oversubscribed competition. The result is: The athlete doesn’t get to compete and becomes ineligible for team selection and team’s composition is now compromised.

Some of the more probing questions in this section ask if the organization ensures that their members have access to current rules; or if the rules make it clear to member athletes what is required for selection to a team and if they understand what will occur if the requirement criteria are not met. It further questions whether the organization accepts criticism from its member community for rules that are unclear and whether it publishes clarifications, while working to make adjustments that improve the situation.

Decision-Making Authority: Have we made it clear to our member community (athletes, coaches, officials, volunteers, administrators and others) in advance, what our decision-making powers are and what criteria we will use to make decisions in plain, easily understandable language?



In order to properly govern, administrative bodies need to be able to make important decisions that affect members. But, there is a responsibility to ensure that, not only are the members informed about decisions being made that affect them, but that the decisions made are made by those who have the proper authority to do so. Perhaps coaches, who can act as a bridge between athletes and administration, should be aware of who, administratively, can make decisions that will affect themselves and their athletes and hold those individuals accountable for their decisions. At the same time, coaches should also be aware of the kinds of decisions they can and cannot make. For example, in your sport organization, are coaches authorized to hand out disciplinary sanctions to the athletes? If so, are there certain circumstances or situations in which such decision must be made by another person or group of persons? More specifically, if your sport organization has a code of conduct which confers authority to the high performance committee, or the board of directors, to determine whether there was a breach and what sanction should apply, do you know where the limits of your own authority lie as coach?

Among questions under this heading, the Guide asks whether the member community understands and accepts the authority of the organization to make the decisions that affect them, or whether members are aware of the decisions that a sport organization can make that will affect them.

The discussion on fair play and sportsmanship in sport is important, but just as importantly the discussion needs to be extended to include the actions of the decision-makers of sport organizations, namely administrators and coaches. This is more than simply having

individuals champion these qualities for the field of play (towards athletes, coaches, officials, parents and fans) but, also, in the context of running the organization. A coach's position in the sport organization is one that strategically can be seen to bridge the gap between on and off the field aspects of their sport, and so with that comes an ability to engage in both aspects. In order to be successful, an organization needs to ensure that it "plays" fair both on the field of play and organizationally. The SDRCC is confident that the Guide is a step in that direction and that coaches can play a pivotal role in instilling the fair play and sportsmanship values at the administrative level of their respective sport organizations. ✎

References:

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