Lessons in Coaching Youth Sports

CONTRIBUTIONS TO ASKCOACHWOLFF.COM

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The essays concern social issues; ethics and sportsmanship; safety and health; obligations of parents, coaches, and league administrators; news and trends; and similar subjects.

In this Repository, Professor Abrams’ essays are presented in full and arranged by year.

2018
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COACHING TIPS: Be Sensitive to the Concerns of Your Benchwarmers!

JANUARY 17, 2018

0 COMMENTS

Emotional Safety — and the Harms of Benchwarming

By Doug Abrams
Headlines these days pay close attention to youth leaguers’ physical safety – concussions, over-use injuries, and other risks and conditions that damage health and well-being. But player “safety” also means emotional safety, this column’s subject. Parents and coaches fulfill their most important missions when an athlete emerges from the final youth league game both physically healthy and emotionally healthy.

In our society that places so much emphasis on sports, few humiliations damage a youth leaguer’s emotional safety more than chronic benchwarming.

USA Hockey, the sport’s national governing body, sets a wholesome standard for youth leagues: “Fair and equal opportunity for all to participate.” The National Hockey League, USA Hockey, and more than a dozen other prominent hockey organizations recently adopted a Declaration of Principles reaffirming that “hockey is for everyone”; the foundation for this imperative is respect for “each individual’s physical, emotional and cognitive development.” Similar aspirations should drive decision makers in other youth sports.

“Fair and equal opportunity” means more than just enrolling all interested youth leaguers and placing them on teams at appropriate levels of play. Enrollment and placement are the easy parts. The sternest challenge comes in games, when coaches eyeing the scoreboard get a tenseness in the stomach and might feel tempted to overlook some players for much or most of the contest. For more than 40 years, I coached youth hockey players who are now in their 20s, 30s, 40s, and 50s. My former players still tell me why, in both the short term and the long term, emotional safety in youth sports depends on coaches who heed their better instincts by playing every team member.

**Short-Term Emotional Safety**

In the short term, chronic benchwarming does not let kids be kids. Players join the team to play. They do not join to sit for a coach who thinks that benching some players might help win games whose scores families will likely soon forget. Former NBA player Bob Bigelow is right: “Few things violate a child’s basic wants and needs – and his or her basic rights – more than sitting on a bench.”

Childhood in America is meant to be a time of relative innocence and personal growth. Sports should deliver players fun and camaraderie, accented by personal achievement from giving best effort. Earning a living, paying mortgages, raising children, and similar weighty obligations will dominate their adult lives soon enough.

**Long-Term Emotional Safety**

In the long term, chronic benchwarming can leave permanent emotional scars from tattered self-
esteem. A few years ago, the Los Angeles Times published a letter-to-the-editor by a former Little Leaguer about memories of his chronic benching one summer when he was a fourth-grader more than a generation earlier. “Our coach played only the stars,” he wrote, “I remember nothing else of that summer . . . except the sole inning I played. I struck out and screwed up a play in left field. For the remainder of the season, I was invisible to the coach.” The letter writer confided that “the shame and humiliation of that one night at age 9 never went away. I’m 50 now.”

Shame and humiliation can impose serious lingering deprivation. More than four decades of coaching youth hockey taught me that as many as a quarter of a youth team’s players are destined to lead difficult, challenging adult lives through no fault of their own. On a roster of about 16 players, this means about three or four kids. When these players are adults years from now, they or a family member may experience disability or disease, for example. Or financial stress, loss of employment, serious accident or injury, or other crisis whose temporary or permanent dislocation can strike families swiftly and at random.

Today’s coach does not know which eager 11-year-olds will be dealt a difficult hand in life; the players do not know; and the parents do not know. But these players are in the locker room, and they are standing right in front of the coach.

Nostalgia remains one of the great strengths of the human mind. When my former players cope now with family adversity, youth sports still provides some of their most enduring memories of pure, unvarnished fun. When adults hit personal roadblocks, they can draw confidence and fortitude from reminiscing about good times, including experiences years earlier on childhood playing fields or in locker rooms.

Coaches deprive their youth leaguers of emotional safety when bittersweet memories of chronic benchwarming disable this lifelong support mechanism. Players remember the good times, but they never forget the bad times.

The Key Question

Coaching other people’s children is serious business, a relationship grounded in trust and respect. How can youth league coaches know whether they are fulfilling their responsibility to help keep every player emotionally safe, now and later in life?

Look squarely in the mirror and ask one question: “How well do I treat my least talented player?” The answer will tell plenty about what emotional safety means to the coach.
COACHING TIPS: Be Sensitive to the Concerns of Your Benc... http://www.askcoachwolff.com/2018/01/17/coaching-tips-sensiti...

Sources: Declaration of Principles

HEROIC ATHLETES: Kids Learning the Power of Giving Back

Teaching Players Citizenship

Through Community Service Projects

By Doug Abrams

One night after a preseason practice a few years ago, I sat down with a few players on our Central Missouri Eagles Youth Hockey Association’s high school club team. I was the team’s goalie coach and served on the association’s board of directors. The board had recently adopted an ambitious credo for the association’s teams and families: “Building Good Athletes and Great Citizens.” Now the association sought to insure that the credo would spur citizenship education through hockey, rather than rest as an idle promise on a banner or letterhead.

This column describes the national, state, and local recognition that the Eagles association received for its teams’ service projects that lived up to the credo. Other high school programs and youth teams of all ages can chalk up similar achievements with service projects that make a difference.

“Now We’re Doing It Worldwide”

The Eagles high school players voted unanimously to make our opening game a benefit for the local children’s hospital. Our home games usually drew about 300 fans, and we offered free admission that night to anyone who brought one or more new stuffed animals for the sick and injured patients.
We hoped to collect about 100 donations, but we sorely underestimated community generosity. Thanks to local media coverage and flyers distributed earlier in the week at the ice arena, we collected more than 500, mostly from the game's attendees, but many from the players' families, friends, and classmates. Three weeks later, the high school team's tri-captains spent a Saturday afternoon at the hospital visiting with the young patients and distributing the toys.

In their thank-you letter, hospital staff described “how powerfully these dedicated [Eagles players] have impacted the lives of the sick and injured children. . . . Their work delivering stuffed animals, smiles, and friendship to our patients has brought immeasurable happiness.”

The Eagles high school team continued the Children's Hospital Night once each year, and the number of stuffed animals collected swelled to nearly a thousand. Opposing teams sometimes brought stuffed animals to the game, and the teams' cooperative efforts helped produce clean, hard-fought contests.

One year, the Children’s Hospital Night collected so many stuffed animals that physicians distributed some when they performed pediatric surgeries and other procedures in developing nations overseas. “Hockey lets us put smiles on kids' faces,” an Eagles tri-captain told a reporter, “and now we're doing it worldwide.”

**Setting an Example**

The high school team's players were the Eagles association's oldest, and the Children’s Hospital community service project set an example for the younger teams — the mites, squirts, pee wees, and bantams whose players ranged in age from five to fourteen. Before an early-season practice every year, each younger team held a locker room meeting, sometimes led by the coaches and sometimes led by the captains. The players voted on a project and then performed it, guided by their parents and coaches, who reinforced the virtues of volunteerism. The players often chose their own projects, though the youngest teams would choose from projects suggested by the adults.

Over the years, Eagles younger teams collected toys and clothes for the local shelter that protects abused and neglected children. And collected hundreds of new and used backpacks for abused and neglected children in the local family court. And hundreds of cans of food for needy families served by the local food bank. And hundreds of children’s books for county health clinics that serve needy local families.

Each project enriched community life, worthy accomplishments for teens and pre-teens. The projects united each individual Eagles team toward a common goal, and the projects also united the various
teams as they helped one another accomplish their projects. Because the winter’s prime focus was on learning and playing hockey, the younger teams (like the high school team) performed their projects in a discrete period, usually about two weeks.

Dividends For the Players

Essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote that by volunteering to help others, people also help themselves. Recalling his early impressions when he first joined the Eagles, one high school player wrote this in a school essay: “When I learned of the Children’s Hospital Game and other community service projects done by the Eagles, I was in shock. I said to myself ‘What kind of hockey team is this?’ I quickly discovered that it was not just a hockey team; it was another step in life.”

Many Eagles parents and coaches sensed that besides this immediate personal enrichment from community outreach, performing service projects earned their players a credential that would soon enhance their applications to prospective employers and colleges that value backgrounds marked by civic engagement and selflessness. Players now had narratives for the essays and personal interviews that these applications typically require, and materials for the attachments that the applications sometimes permit.

Eagles players earned plenty for their future narratives and attachments because media coverage led national, state, and local leaders to recognize their volunteer efforts. A Missouri U.S. Senator and two local U.S. House members praised the Eagles, and their statements were published in the Congressional Record. Missouri’s Governor met with the Eagles and issued a proclamation honoring the players for public service initiatives that “have brought honor to Missouri.” The Missouri state Senate and House of Representatives passed resolutions honoring Eagles teams for “setting a positive example.”

Eagles appeared on local radio and television. One local daily newspaper editorialized that the Eagles “have won big” with the community service projects, and the paper earlier called the high school team “a philanthropic organization on skates.”

The Eagles association received the Honoring the Game Award, presented annually by Positive Coaching Alliance, based in northern California. The Award recognized three youth sports programs nationally that “strive to win, but also strive to help their players develop skills that will serve them throughout their lifetimes.”

“The Eagles credo says it all,” read PCA’s citation, but “it’s not enough just to say it all. The Eagles do it all too.”
Teaching Citizenship Through Sports

Integrating a community service project into a youth league season is not difficult to accomplish. First, the team or league should enlist support from the parents and coaches. Then empower the players by letting them vote for their favored project. Give youthful generosity a chance, and assure players the needed encouragement and support once they decide. The players can rise to the occasion, even while they and their families also perform whatever fundraising project the sports association requires or urges to help contain the rising financial costs of their own enrollment.

Philanthropy and community service are learned impulses, and the impulses can endure. I happened to see a former Eagles high school player at a recent social gathering. Now in his early thirties, he still talks about the team's stuffed animals drives for the children's hospital — and he still donates time to worthy causes.

One parent told PCA what the Eagles' high school community service projects taught his son, who was then a college junior: "He has chosen to forego a personal opportunity in order to travel to Mississippi . . . to volunteer in hurricane rebuilding efforts. He has learned to contribute."

In communities large and small, sports can be a force for positive good. When youth leaguers volunteer their time and energies, parents and coaches teach citizenship through team membership and athletic competition. The players learn about what President Barack Obama called “the beauty of service.” And about President George H.W. Bush’s instruction that “any definition of a successful life must include serving others.”
Decorum and Fun:

Advice From the Pinnacle For Youth Leaguers’ Parents

By Doug Abrams

One Sunday morning in late February, University of South Carolina men’s basketball coach Frank Martin arrived a few minutes early for his 10-year-old son’s basketball game. Near the end of the prior 9-year-old game, he watched a parent charge onto the court to confront the referee with a spate of insults.

At a news conference a few days afterwards, Martin had plenty to say about youth sports parenting. “I go watch my kids play, I don’t say boo. I don’t wave my arms, I don’t try to coach my kids. . . . I sit in the stands and I don’t say a word.”

Martin urged respect for youth league referees, coaches, and players. “[O]n a Sunday morning instead of being at church, [the referees] are out there trying to make a couple of bucks, to pay their bills, feed their families,” and yet “we’re gonna have the adults in the stands yelling obscenities at them?” The coaches are “giving up their personal time on a Sunday, for free, to help other people’s children, yet, we’re gonna have the adults in the stands . . . [c]riticizing every decision?” Parents are “[y]elling at the kids” from the stands as if the youngsters were professional adult millionaires playing in packed major league arenas rather than children trying to learn physical and social skills in front of their families in local gyms.
Coach Martin is the latest prominent voice from the sports world to call on many youth sports parents to reevaluate their perspectives and misconduct. The bywords are decorum and fun, and the voices are not confined to one sport or one nation.

**Mike Matheny**

In interviews last year with St. Louis Cardinals manager Mike Matheny and New York Yankees manager Joe Girardi, the *Washington Post* explored parents’ roles in their children’s sports.

Matheny’s interview stressed decorum. He urged parents to “ask their kids what they want you to do when watching their game.” He answered his own question: “I have yet to see a kid who likes to be yelled at.” He advised that parents “have a better chance to have a healthy relationship with your kid if you’re not acting like an idiot every time they walk out onto a sports field.”

Matheny also focuses on the role of fun in youth sports. In a letter to the parents of the youth baseball team that he coached in 2009 and now in his book, he advanced ground rules. “[T]he biggest role of the parent is to be a silent source of encouragement. I think if you ask most boys what they would want their parents to do during the game, they would say ‘NOTHING’.” After the game, “these boys need to hear . . . that you enjoyed watching them and you hope that they had fun.”

**Joe Girardi**

“Sitting in the stands and after the game,” Girardi told the *Post*, “my job as a parent is to let my kids know that I believe in them no matter how they perform. . . . That’s the essence of our job as parents – to believe in our kids and to let them know it.”

Girardi’s formula? “Once your son or daughter goes into a game, let them go out, compete, and have fun.”

**Bjorn Borg**

Nearly two years ago, CNN’s Sophie Eastaugh wrote about an interview that tennis great Bjorn Borg gave to Open Court’s Pat Cash. “When we’re traveling around Sweden we see all these crazy parents, I mean it’s unbelievable,” said Borg. “[Y]ou can see sometimes the kids don’t want to play. It’s like the parents push them to do something they don’t want to do.”

Borg’s bottom line? “At this age, it has to be fun.”

**Darryl Strawberry**
In the *Sun Herald* at about the time Eastaugh wrote, writer Patrick Ochs reported on a talk that all-star outfielder Darryl Strawberry delivered in Biloxi, Mississippi. Reflecting on his 17 seasons in Major League Baseball, Strawberry spoke about parents who sap their youngsters’ enthusiasm for the game.

“We need to get back to letting kids have fun and enjoy themselves,” said Strawberry. “Parents need to chill out. Don’t go to games yelling. Let them play.” The eight-time all-star does not like what he sees. “Parents today push their kids and before you know it they’re 18, 19 and don’t want to play anymore.”

Strawberry’s solution? “We just have to get back to understanding that the game is fun . . . It’s fun. Fun. Remember, fun.”

**Wayne Gretzky**

A few years ago, Wayne Gretzky told the *Globe and Mail* that he encouraged his five children to have fun with various sports. “Just go out and play,” he told them. “Just enjoy it . . . Learn what it’s like to be around your teammates – the highs of winning and the lows of losing.”

**Bobby Orr**

“No parent can guarantee their kids the joy of winning a Stanley Cup,” says hockey legend Bobby Orr, “but they can guarantee them the opportunity to find their passion for play.” “I guarantee any of the parents,” he told the *Hamilton Spectator*, that “if your son or daughter has the ability to play at a higher level, as long as they’re having fun, as long as they have passion for the game, they’ll get a chance . . . [L]et them play, let them have fun.”

**Common Refrains**

These players and coaches deliver advice from the pinnacle of their sports. From their own experiences on the way up, they understand what it takes to meet young athletes’ emotional needs. They understand the value of wise adult leadership, not only for the minuscule few youth leaguers who later make it big, but also for the multitude who do not. The advice comes from the heart because the players and coaches usually speak, not only for their own children, but also for the millions of other boys and girls who play sports every year and strive to win.

These players and coaches strike common refrains – maintain perspective, demonstrate self-restraint, and make the game fun. If more parents took this advice, perhaps the percentages of youth leaguers who quit playing by about the age of 13 would drop below the usual range of about 70%.
From the Highest Vantages

Hearing advice about youth sports from elite players and coaches may resemble hearing advice from a Nobel Laureate in Chemistry about the most effective way to conduct a high school chemistry class. The Nobel Laureate may say the same things that the local high school chemistry teacher says. Parents may think that they know better than the teacher, but it is hard for thoughtful parents to close their ears to someone whose resume includes a Nobel Prize.

Some parents similarly may think that they know better than the reform voices who advocate decorum and fun as the cornerstones of children’s sports. But it is hard for thoughtful parents to close their ears to elite players and coaches who say the same things, bolstered by resumes that feature professional and collegiate achievements and Hall of Fame plaques.

In the short run and the long run, youth leaguers would be much better off if more parents heeded the accumulated wisdom about decorum and fun that resonates in unison from the highest vantages of the professional and collegiate ranks.

ABUSIVE SPORTS PARENTS: Still Trying to Curb Violent Acts by Angry Parents

APRIL 24, 2018

More About Why Criminal Prosecutions Can Help Control Parental Violence in Youth Sports

By Doug Abrams

A few years ago, a Minnesota judge sentenced a father to six months in prison for grabbing his son’s pee wee hockey coach in a choke hold during a practice session while the 11-12-year-old players watched. The father had pleaded guilty to one felony count of terroristic threats after prosecutors dismissed a misdemeanor assault charge.

I recall that a few days after the sentencing, Rick Wolff did an informative show about parental violence at children’s sports events, including violence that summons police intervention. Rick correctly voiced concern that the nation may be experiencing an “epidemic of sports parents going wild.”

A Small Minority

I follow the nation’s newspapers for youth sports articles almost every day, and I too sense signs of this epidemic of parental assaults. Headlines such these tell the story: “Where Children Play, Grown-Ups Often Brawl”; “Adults Losing Cool at Kids’ Games A Growing Trend”; “When Cheers Turn to Jeers (and Tears): Moms and Dads as Spoilsports and Hoodlums”; Kids’ Sports Turn Deadly Serious:

In my experience, youth sports parents prone to violence remain a small minority. I suspect, however, that violence by some parents against coaches, referees, and others happens more frequently than a tally of headlines and their accompanying stories would indicate. Local sports associations and leagues likely overlook many troublesome incidents for one reason or another, and likely resolve other incidents without calling police and attracting media attention.

Youth leagues have explored prudent strategies – including mandatory pre-season parent meetings – to sensitize parents about maintaining decorum and civility in the heat of their children’s competition. Leagues should continue refining and improving these educational strategies in the light of experience. Like other worthwhile prevention strategies in American life, however, parent education efforts do not influence everyone who is prone to the targeted misconduct. Reduction, rather than 100% eradication, remains the marker of any effective prevention program.

This column discusses why, in extreme cases, strategies promoting decorum and civility in youth sports should include summoning police to arrest a parent (or a coach who crosses the line) for assaults or similar violent offenses. In appropriate cases, criminal prosecution may follow. In non-sports cases, courts routinely punish defendants for assaults similar to the Minnesota youth hockey choke hold; adults who commit their violence at youth sports venues do not deserve a free pass denied to adults who commit violence on Main Street.

The Minnesota choke hold case and other formal court proceedings, however, seem to be outliers. Prosecutors may hesitate to charge adults for assaults committed in the heat of youth sports events, even though local awareness of criminal proceedings might deter other local adults from committing similar assaults. After discussing reasons for prosecutors’ reported hesitance, I turn to the likelihood of deterrence.

**Hesitant Prosecutors**

Prosecutorial hesitance persists because convictions can be difficult to win unless the victim suffers injury, or unless the offending parent’s act is caught on video. Without this proof, a parental assault case can degenerate into a “he said-she said” stalemate that handcuffs efforts to prove the charges. The parent may claim self-defense (“He pushed me first”) or provocation (“She cussed at me...
first”). The parent may have an eyewitness friend or ally who is willing to lie, or bend the truth, to law enforcement authorities, the prosecutor, or the court.

Assaultive sports parents can also make sympathetic defendants. Most are first-time offenders, and not the sort of repeat criminals who rightfully consume much of a prosecutor's attention. Most hold regular employment, and most make good neighbors despite self-control issues during games. Some of these parents hold visibly responsible positions in the community. Court or juries can also be sympathetic to parents who apologize for assaults that they committed not for financial gain, but from a misguided effort to serve their child after emotions got the better of them.

Focusing solely on the outcome in violent youth sports cases, however, misses the point. Prosecutors frequently face defendants who claim self-defense or provocation, eyewitnesses who tailor their testimony, or defense lawyers who portray their clients in a sympathetic light. Courts and juries do occasionally acquit despite sufficient evidence of guilt, but this potential is not unique to youth sports cases. Where prosecutors believe in good faith that have evidence sufficient to charge a parent for assaultive behavior, they signal social disapproval as much by the charge as by the outcome.

Deterrence

When prosecutors do secure a guilty plea or a conviction, the court may sentence the sports parent to little more than probation or community service. Without a prior criminal record, the parent usually appears unlikely to pose a continuing threat to community safety. But court-imposed sanctions on violent parents – including brief jail time in an appropriate case – remain important for their potential to improve the atmosphere in local youth leagues by deterring some parents from future assaults.

In criminal law, the likelihood of deterrence may depend on one or both of two factors: (1) the nature of the offense, and (2) the nature of the offender. *The nature of the offense*, by itself, holds limited promise in youth leagues because locally publicized prosecutions are more likely to deter future premeditated crimes than future impulsive crimes. Most youth league assaults fall into the second category because parents do not normally wake up in the morning plotting to attack a coach, referee, or someone else at their child's game later that day. Most parental assaults happen in the heat of the moment without much thought or planning, and criminal prosecutions hold only limited potential to deter truly impulsive behavior.

*The nature of the offender* holds greater promise in youth leagues because local publicity about prosecutions can deter people who think rationally most of the time, and who sense the adverse consequences of momentary impulse. Surveys report, for example, that non-custodial parents pay
child support at higher rates in places where criminal non-support prosecutions hit the news and remain a realistic prospect. Adverse local publicity can deter non-payment by creating apprehension among people who follow the headlines. ("I could be next."). Like many non-custodial parents who owe past-due child support that they are capable of paying, most youth sports parents are otherwise rational people who are trying to earn a living and meet daily obligations.

Youth sports parents might also sense beforehand that if they get a criminal record or serve prison time even briefly, the real losers from the fallout would be innocent family members, including their children. Even for relatively minor offenses, for example, a criminal record can carry serious collateral consequences, including the parent’s loss of employment, difficulty securing new employment, and an enduring public blemish on the parent and the family. The children may bear the brunt of stares and whispers in town.

If a youth sports parent or a friend has ever retained a lawyer, the parent likely also knows that defending against a criminal charge means hefty legal fees that saddle the family budget with an unanticipated expense that could more fruitfully be devoted to other needs, including their children’s college savings accounts.

**Prevention and Reaction**

With videos, written materials, and sometimes guest speakers, many youth leagues and public and private schools seek to prevent violence and other misconduct by educating sports parents about expectations for appropriate conduct. I suspect that even without this instruction, most parents would not cross the line into violence. In any event, pre-season parent meetings and similar education initiatives remain the prime strategies, with criminal prosecution the last resort.

Parent education undoubtedly spares many victims and avoids much embarrassment by preventing violent incidents. On the other hand, prosecution can only react to violent incidents after they claim one or more victims. But no prevention initiative can prevent 100% of the conduct it targets. In extreme cases, the legal process must react to incidents of parental violence after the fact. Some incidents that evade even the best prevention efforts are so serious that they harm not only the immediate victim, but also children who witness the violence or hear about it, and the overwhelming majority of families who rightfully seek a physically and emotionally safe environment for their children’s sports.

Sources: Pat Pheifer, Dad Gets 6 Months for Attack on Coach, Star Tribune (Minneapolis, Minn.),
LEGAL CONCERNS: Applying A Little Common Sense Can Go a Long Way

MAY 30, 2018

The U.S. Justice Department Enforces Equal Opportunity For Youth Athletes With a Disability

By Doug Abrams

Sixteen-year-old Ryan Huizdos of suburban Detroit is legally blind from albinism, a rare congenital condition that impairs vision. Without incident or objection, he played Little League baseball for five years using yellow baseballs that enabled him to see well enough to pitch and bat. In a 2015 district tournament, however, Little League prohibited use of a yellow baseball. Supporting their son, Ryan’s parents wrote to the U.S. Justice Department.

In an article by Tresa Baldas in early May, the Detroit Free Press and the Associated Press report that the Justice Department threatened to sue Little League Baseball for violating the Americans With Disabilities Act. In an interview with Baldas, U.S. Attorney Matthew Schneider (the Department’s chief lawyer in the Detroit region) said that “[a]ll Little League Baseball had to do was make a reasonable accommodation. . . . It’s only the color of the ball. . . . That shouldn’t be controversial.”

Baldas reports that the Justice Department has reached an agreement with Little League Baseball’s cooperation. With a waiver, Ryan can play this season using yellow baseballs. And so can other vision-impaired boys and girls nationwide, thanks to a new Little League policy that permits families to apply for similar waivers.

“Equal Opportunity to Participate”
The Justice Department initiative echoes the directive delivered in 2013 by the U.S. Department of Education. The DOE instructed public school districts that federal disability law requires them to "provide students with disabilities an equal opportunity to participate alongside their peers in after-school athletics," including an equal opportunity to try out for the squad as the coach seeks to "pick the best team."

On the playing field, federal disability law strikes a similar balance. "[S]chools don't have to change the essential rules of the game," Education Secretary Arne Duncan explained, "and they don't have to do anything that would provide a student with a disability an unfair competitive advantage. But they do need to make reasonable modifications (such as using a laser instead of a starter pistol to start a race so a deaf runner can compete) to insure that students with disabilities get the very same opportunity to play as everyone else."

**Good Law and Good Values**

The Education Department's 2013 directive and the Justice Department's initiative on Ryan Huizdos' behalf reflect more than good law. They also reflect good values. The values extend to sports other than baseball, and to disabilities other than visual impairment.

To the maximum extent possible, sports teams and leagues should enable children with disabilities to play if their parents approve, their abilities permit, and their play does not change the character of the game or compromise safety. Wholesome programs, such as Little League's Challenger Division, open doors for children whose conditions make such inclusion inadvisable or impossible.

Leagues and teams should favor inclusion, not because they fear lawsuits or adverse publicity, but because favoring inclusion is the right thing to do. In baseball and other sports, the media regularly profile children who overcome Down syndrome, a missing limb, or other disability to win support, acceptance, and respect. As these children rise to the occasion, their participation on the team paves a two-way street. Sports teaches children with disabilities, and these children teach teammates about perseverance and determination by surmounting barriers, achieving their potential, and contributing to the team.

Inclusion in youth sports is good for athletes, and it is good for America.

The Chronic Nationwide Referee Shortage and Its Safety Risks

By Doug Abrams

“Everybody thinks [referees] should be perfect, so mom and dad start yelling at the officials. These officials don’t want to be berated all the time, so . . . they get out.”

— Mark Jones, Alabama High School Athletic Association, Director of Officials, January 2018.

Each day I watch the national media for stories that report trends and developments in youth league and interscholastic sports. The stories run the gamut. Some report wholesome sportsmanlike competition; others report violence, confrontation, and disrespect for the game; still others report pressing concerns that warrant careful attention from leagues and teams.

This column discusses the pressing concern identified by Mark Jones, the declining numbers of adults who are willing to officiate youth games. Some news stories call the steady decline a national epidemic or crisis. In the first half of 2018 alone, headlines such as these have appeared almost weekly: “Illinois High School Referee Shortage Getting Worse” (Chicago Tribune); “Colorado High School Sports Seeing Decline in Referees” (KDVR-TV); “Kansas, Missouri Facing Shortage Of Referees For Youth and High School Sports” (FOX4KC-TV); “Ref Shortage In Metro Detroit Spells Trouble For Youth Sports” (WXYZ-TV); and “‘Harsh Environment’: How a Shortage of Referees Is Hurting Rock Hill’s Youth Sports” (The Herald, Rock Hill, S.C.).
A National Concern

In youth leagues and schools alike, the steady nationwide exodus of qualified officials stems from various causes. Pay remains relatively low, for example. Family commitments may deflect recruits who are raising young children. Younger recruits may soon relocate for employment opportunities. Weekday afternoon games may conflict with obligations of full-time employment. Some veteran officials retire from age.

But one cause for the exodus – flagged by Mark Jones — stands out above all the rest, the refrain stressed in virtually every news article I see about referee shortages. Referees quit in droves each year because they are unwilling to tolerate incessant verbal, and sometimes physical, abuse inflicted by coaches and especially by parents. Chicago-area writer C.R. Walker describes fans who “yell at [referees] at the top of their lungs, shout profanities in their direction, and demean and threaten them.” An official’s thick skin eventually wears thin, patience with unruliness wanes, and enough is enough.

“They’re Out! Umps, Refs Have Had Enough of Your Yelling.” Under this Idaho Statesman headline last year, Michael Katz quoted a local volleyball commissioner: “Parents are getting worse. They are more mouthy, and they don’t care if they try to come down and get in [an official’s] face.” Katz said that “[a] few bad experiences . . . make it hard to sell someone on officiating a high school game, much less continuing at the youth level.”

In the Washington Post, Matt Bonesteel wrote last year about high school referees frustrated by “parents and coaches screaming for your head . . . .” I know what he was talking about. In my final few years as a youth hockey coach here in Missouri, I frequently heard parents showering officials with obscenities and other insults that no respectable adult would direct at the family dog. The parents’ cascading verbal abuse within my earshot put no points on the scoreboard for the child’s team, but the abuse made me squirm, even though I was not on the ice with a whistle.

Compromising Safety

Aside from the discomfort caused by the rank incivility that infects so many youth games, why should the acute shortage of qualified game officials concern leagues and teams?

Some immediate harm is readily apparent. Games may be postponed, rescheduled, or even canceled for lack of available officials. Seasons may be shortened so that league schedules do not outpace the roster of available officials. A Chicago-area official told writer C.R. Walker that “every day is a fight to get games covered.”
Families notice the inconvenience when chronic referee shortages sideline kids, but I have written on Rick Wolff's blog about a more serious potential harm that can escape the untrained eye. Especially in contact and collision sports, referee shortages can increase the risk of injury to players, including ones who play clean and follow the rules of the game.

"To be effective for promoting safety," says a recent medical study, a sport’s rules “must be enforced rigorously and consistently by referees and leagues.” Parents and coaches assume important enforcement roles, but referees are the primary enforcers once the game starts. The American Academy of Pediatrics reports consensus among sports medicine professionals that “[o]fficials controlling the physicality of the game ... can ... play significant roles in reducing contact injuries.”

This essential control suffers when parents drive so many veteran referees to quit each year. Many replacement refs are not yet ready for the responsibilities cast on them. Without the insult-induced departures of so many veterans, many of the replacements would not yet be on the field.

Most parents and coaches do not stoop to confrontational verbal or physical abuse of referees. Many adults may find such abuse disgusting, but disgust does not reduce the harmful effects of the errant minority who cross the line. At all age levels, player safety may depend on overcoming what The Guardian calls “a sports culture that dehumanizes referees.”

ABUSIVE SPORTS PARENTS: Are Teenage Refs the Answer to the Shortage of Game Officials?

Encouraging and Training Teen Referees

By Doug Abrams

In the past few weeks, Rick Wolff and I have engaged readers and listeners in a dialog about the chronic shortages of referees and other game officials in youth leagues and high school sports programs from coast to coast.

Nearly every week, national and local news stories report that more and more seasoned adult officials are quitting in disgust, frustrated by verbal (and sometimes physical) abuse from parents in the stands and coaches on the sidelines. These officials typically signed up to stay active in their game, to serve youth as adults served them years earlier, and to earn a few dollars. But love of the game has its limits. So does tolerance for disrespect. At some point, enough is enough, even for some of the most dedicated.

When adult officials in sizable numbers quit before their time, the exodus threatens to damage the players’ athletic experience. Games may have to be postponed, rescheduled, or cancelled. Other games may proceed with less experienced officials who are not yet ready for the responsibilities they must assume. Particularly in contact and collision sports, fielding less experienced officials can pose safety risks.
Teen Officials

This column concerns a response that has accelerated in recent years as the ranks of adult officials continue to shrivel. To cover games and teach leadership, many youth leagues and associations recruit and train teens to officiate games in younger age groups. In my last few years coaching squirt hockey teams for 9-10-year-olds, I cannot recall ever having a referee over the age of about fifteen, except occasionally in the playoffs.

Teen referees may seek to assume leadership roles, to perform worthwhile community service that bolsters their college applications, and to earn a few dollars. In my experience, the teens take their responsibilities seriously and do a careful job worthy of an adult. But they too are often chased away before long, once they or their parents grow fed up with abuse from parents and coaches who may see the adolescents as even easier marks for harassment than adult officials.

I can only imagine the toll that today's abuse from some parents and coaches can take on teen officials. In 1966, I was a freshman at W. Tresper Clarke High School in Westbury. One night I approached Leif Birkeland, president of our Central Nassau Athletic Association Little League, to ask whether I could be an umpire in the younger age groups on some nights when my team was not playing. He said yes, and I maintained an active umpiring schedule each spring until I left for college in 1969. Mr. Birkeland was ahead of his time because teen umps were uncommon in those days, at least in the Central Nassau program.

Looking back now after more than 50 years, I recall that I made some isolated mistakes behind the plate and on the bases, and I know that even my correct calls sometimes upset some players and coaches. For umpires of any age, mistakes and the quest for quality performance come with the territory. But Central Nassau parents and coaches never dished out the sort of physical or emotional harassment that teen officials often face nowadays. My parents raised their children to “respect your elders,” so I don't know how I would have reacted as a teen to a public confrontation with an angry adult. I doubt that the playing field would have been level.

Fast-forward the 21st century, when the atmosphere has grown more heated at youth league games around the country, even in the youngest age groups. Every manhandled teen official is someone else’s child, and each one deserves the physical and emotional safety that sports promises all its participants. We cannot simply dismiss news reports of verbal or physical abuse by rationalizing that only a minority of adults cross the line, while most behave decently. Abusive parents and coaches do constitute the minority, but I suspect that media coverage alone actually understates their number. Many readers of this column have doubtlessly witnessed abuse of teen officials that never
reached the local papers because, without an injury or arrest, even a sports program's pattern of coarse incidents may seem commonplace and not newsworthy nowadays.

How can local leagues and youth sports associations counter adult abuse as they encourage and train teen officials? The potential remedies begin with sustained prevention efforts conceived and led by the league's concerned parents and coaches, sometimes with videos and other materials provided by state and national governing bodies. In the most serious cases, criminal prosecutions for assault, endangering the welfare of a child, or a related offense may appear warranted. A suggested remedial blueprint appears in more detail in an earlier column: http://www.askcoachwolff.com/2013/12/17/obnoxious-sports-parents-taking-ones-frustrations-teenage-ref

Most recently on July 8, Rick and his callers have posted other helpful recommendations about how local sports programs can stem abuse of referees.


Conclusion: Adults Bullying a 15-Year-Old

Every so often, a newspaper column sends a powerful, unforgettable message. A few year ago, I happened to read a letter-to-the-editor in the Meridian Booster, a small weekly newspaper in Alberta, Canada. The letter still strikes a chord for describing adults' unrelenting verbal abuse of a local teen who was doing his job.

"I watched," recounted the letter writer, "as two grown men in their 30s and 40s bullied a 15-year-old boy while he was at work. For more than an hour, the men were frantically yelling and hollering, waving their arms, calling the boy dumb, and when all of that didn't work they resorted to glaring menacingly at the kid."

"When the boy's shift was over," the writer continued, "I watched him leave his work area, change out of his uniform and go home. This place is off limits to the general public, but I watched as one of these men aggressively barged right into this changing area and continued to yell at and berate the boy until the boy and his co-workers asked the man to leave. After this man left, I watched as he went over to his friend (a prominent business owner in our area) and a woman who had joined them. The two men and woman told each other how justified they felt to confront this kid, patting each other on the back and planning their next moves."

The targeted 15-year-old boy's job? Refereeing a youth hockey game between two teams of
elementary school kids. The adult bullies? Coaches and parents of one of the teams.

Learning From an Iowa Softball Player’s Random Act of Kindness

By Doug Abrams

In mid-July, Roland-Story High School finished third in the Class 3A Iowa state high school softball tournament in Fort Dodge. The team won an even greater victory, however, thanks to one player, Emily Berggren, who left a handwritten card and a five-dollar bill in an envelope for the attendant at the pass gate, where players and coaches entered the field complex each day.

“I just wanted to let you know,” Emily’s card read, “that all your hard work this week has not gone unnoticed. It is so hot and you have been out here for a week with a smile on your face. Here is $5 so that you can get ice cream or something after today. I will be praying for you today. Thank you for being a blessing this week!”

Kim Vaughn, the grateful pass gate attendant, posted a photo of the card on Facebook, together with her own thank-you to a softball player she may never meet again: “Emily your team may not have won the state title but in my heart you are a champion!”

Powerful Outreach

The photo of Emily Berggren’s handwritten card, reproduced in a Kansas City Star column, belongs
on the refrigerator door of every family whose son or daughter plays youth league or high school sports. https://www.kansascity.com/sports/spt-columns-blogs/for-petes-sake/article215358100.html (https://www.kansascity.com/sports/spt-columns-blogs/for-petes-sake/article215358100.html). The card provides parents and coaches a “teachable moment,” an opportunity to remind players that sports, like employment relationships and other activities throughout adulthood, often relies on volunteers and employees who, working in plain sight, may go unnoticed and unrecognized. Sports families can provide this notice and recognition with a hello, thank you, handshake, or similar gesture. Reaching out takes no special effort, but outreach remains powerful because it gives credit where credit is due.

Volunteers and employees such as coaches, referees, and league officials rarely go unnoticed in youth sports. But sometimes ignored are the “supporting cast” – the custodians, maintenance staffs, grounds crews, Zamboni drivers, grass cutters, and others who volunteer their time or earn wages but often work in virtual anonymity, denied gratitude and respect for jobs well done.

Service personnel appreciate praise from a parent, coach, or player who is thoughtful enough to say hello or stop for a chat on the way by, instead of ignoring them or taking their efforts for granted. Players are never too young to learn that the unsung volunteer or employee has earned the dignity of recognition by contributing.

Another Story About a High School Athlete

Who Has Overcome Physical Challenges

By Doug Abrams

Earlier this month, 15-year-old Kirkwood (Mo.) High School sophomore Mac Reed entered the game as the holder on two successful extra-point kicks by the Pioneers’ junior varsity football team. Holders normally go unheralded, but writer David Kvidahl told Mac’s story in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. The feature headline tells why: “He Can’t Use His Legs, But This Sophomore Is Playing Football for Kirkwood.”

Kvidahl reports that Mac has spina bifida, which deprives him of use of his legs. Fully accepted by his coaches and teammates, Mac went on the field both times in his wheelchair, left the wheelchair for a position beside the tee, got back in the wheelchair after the kicks, and returned to the sidelines. Kirkwood’s opponent, Marquette High School, had agreed to restrain its defense on extra points and field goals in the second half.

Lessons Taught and Learned

Mac Reed’s story demonstrates yet again how youth league and high school sports can pave a two-
way street when players with Down syndrome, missing limbs, or other conditions win their teams’ acceptance, support, and respect. On the one hand, team membership enables these players to develop self-esteem through athletic competition, and to strengthen resolve for adulthood. Mac told writer Kvidahl that teammates “see me as a human being rather than a disabled child,” and the sophomore described his strategy for living a full life with a disability: “If I try to work to be independent now, it’ll help me in the long run.”

But Mac’s own fruits from his determination pave only one side of the street. As players with disabilities surmount challenges, their perseverance teaches teammates and opponents. A teammate told Kvidahl about lessons learned from Mac’s full participation in the team’s grueling preseason workouts in the summer heat: “There’s lots of kids that start the summer out and end up quitting. Mac’s a good example for them to realize they can do it. If Mac can do it they can do it.”

Shining the Spotlight On Inclusion

Mac Reed’s fortitude, recognized by his teammates and coach and acknowledged by opponents, demonstrates why youth leagues and high school sports programs should remain open to physically challenged boys and girls who otherwise might be stereotyped as incapable of participating. To the maximum extent possible, leagues and teams should encourage children with physical challenges to participate with other children if their parents approve, their abilities permit, their desire remains strong, and their participation does not change the character of the game or compromise safety. Inclusion is good for the athletes and good for the team.

Every so often, the media chronicles youth leaguers and high school athletes who overcome physical challenges with support from their team and the adults in their lives. Most of these stories have little or nothing to do with winning or losing. The news stories are especially worth savoring because they shine the spotlight on respectful athletes who, supported by their coaches and parents, are not yet old enough to graduate from high school. From the St. Louis suburb of Kirkwood, the Post-Dispatch and David Kvidahl have contributed one of these stories.

Source: David Kvidahl, He Can’t Use His Legs, But This Sophomore Is Playing Football for Kirkwood, St. Louis Post-Dispatch, Sept. 14, 2018.
SPORTSMANSHIP (HTTP://WWW.ASKCOACHWOLFF.COM/CATEGORY/SPORTSMANSHIP/)

SPORTSMANSHIP: Doing the Right Thing in Sports Always Leads to a Winning Outcome

November 1, 2018

0 Comments

Crossing the Finish Line: Another Inspiring Story of Sportsmanship

By Doug Abrams

News stories about youth league and high school sports sometimes seem calculated to make readers cringe. Stories, for example, about parents and coaches who resort to confrontation or even violence. Stories about coaches who cut young kids in tryouts and then bench some players who make the team. Stories about referees who find themselves under siege. Stories about high school athletes who feloniously haze younger teammates.

But every so often, news stories captivate readers by spotlighting lofty standards. These stories show what youth league and high school sports can be – a powerful force for enriching competitors’ lives, and for inspiring the rest of us to do better. The standards appear even loftier when the athletes themselves set the bar.

My most recent column recounted a news story about a St. Louis-area high school sophomore who, deprived of use of his legs by spina bifida, plays a meaningful role as a holder on his high school’s junior varsity football team. The sophomore surmounts physical challenges with support and encouragement from his parents, coaches, and teammates.

This column recounts another story that paints a wholesome portrait of athletic competition taken to a higher level. The story appeared in the Columbia Missourian, one of my hometown’s two daily newspapers, and the headline displays the palette: “The Winner of This Race? Sportsmanship.”
“The Right Thing To Do”

Here is what happened. . . . During a high school 3.5K cross country race in late August, Southern Boone County High School senior Blake Schmidt was in the middle of 78 runners when he saw sophomore competitor Jason Crow struggling. As other runners passed Crow, Missourian writer D.J. McGuire reported that Schmidt “ran up, . . . put his arm around him and helped him finish the race. . . . Even when Crow could run again, Schmidt stayed behind him the rest of the way with an arm extended to make sure he could complete the race. Crow finished in 27th and Schmidt in 28th.”

Schmidt told writer McGuire why he sacrificed any chance for a higher finish. “I couldn't just leave him behind because . . . I didn't know how serious it was, and . . . it was just the right thing to do.”

Sportsmanship and Mutual Respect

As values in youth league and high school sports sometimes take hits, voices urge spirited competition marked, not only by the natural will to win, but also by fidelity to sportsmanship and mutual respect among competitors. We may not be there yet, but examples set by athletes such as Blake Schmidt can help us cross the finish line.

Teams United: When School Athletes Counter Fans’ Slurs

By Doug Abrams

Last month, USA TODAY published a troubling article under the headline, “HS Football Players Nationwide Respond to Racist Incidents At Games.” The article is troubling not merely because fans’ vulgar taunting from the bleachers compromises the role of athletic competition in elementary and secondary education. Taunting during interscholastic games remains distasteful but it has been around for a long time, and not only in football.

Last month’s article is especially troubling because, as commentator Bob Cook says, “[r]acism at school sporting events . . . seems to have made a roaring, much more open comeback” lately. He reports “a never-ending supply of racist incidents at school and youth sporting events.” The uneasy line between offensive vulgarity and ugly racism at games seems more easily crossed nowadays, perhaps because our polarized nation’s coarser political climate has diminished public resistance to incivility.

African-American players have not been the only targets, and the ugliness transcends race. Teams with Hispanic players, for example, sometimes suffer chants that, ignoring the players’ U.S. citizenship, are punctuated with such choruses as “Go Back Where You Came From” and “Build the Wall.” Players with disabilities sometimes suffer verbal abuse mocking their condition.
Reports of verbal assaults such as these surface too frequently to be dismissed as mere hi-jinx or products of warped partisanship by emotionally overheated fans. Amateur and professional sports provides a leading barometer of America’s national pulse, and hostile public slurs denigrating a player’s dignity can besmirch the school and community, no matter the fans’ age or motivation.

“This is not what our school stands for”

What can be done to help counter slurs that waft from the bleachers during school games? Because a bulk of fans at school games are students, classroom dialog and parental direction might bring some improvement in fan behavior. So might the prospect of student disciplinary proceedings in appropriate cases.

Improved fan behavior at school games will not happen overnight, but I reiterate here a potential strategy that I advanced on Rick Wolff’s blog a few years ago. What if the players themselves, supported or accompanied by their coaches and school administrators in attendance, halt the game, assume the microphone, and firmly tell the crowd before resuming play that, “This is not what our school stands for”? If they are so inclined, both teams can stand together to deliver the message before they resume play.

When players take the initiative, they learn valuable citizenship lessons first-hand, and so do thoughtful fans. “[E]ducating our youth for citizenship in public schools,” the Supreme Court instructed a generation ago, “is not confined to books, the curriculum, or civics class; schools must teach by example the shared values of a civilized social order.” The “basic educational mission,” the Court said, “emphasizes teaching the “habits and manners of civility. . . . The inculcation of these values is truly the ‘work of the schools.””

The work of teaching values may begin in the classroom, but the work continues in the gym or on the sports field. Student-athletes taking the initiative can teach by their own example.

“It’s Not Fair”

I am reminded again of a basketball game in early 2015 at Lincoln Middle School in Kenosha, Wisconsin. In the opening minutes, the eighth-grade Lincoln players heard fans in the stands verbally abusing one of Lincoln’s courtside cheerleaders, who has Down syndrome. The players themselves stopped the game and approached the bleachers to halt the maltreatment of their classmate.

“The kids in the audience were picking on [the cheerleader], so we all stepped forward,” Lincoln Middle School player Chase Vazquez said later. “We walked off the court and went to the bullies and
told them to stop because that's not right to be mean to another person,” teammate Miles Rodriguez told “Fox & Friends.” “It’s not fair when other people get treated wrong,” teammate Scooter Terrien explained to WTMJ-TV, because “we’re all created the same.”

School Teams United

By stepping forward to protect a seemingly easy target who was no match physically or emotionally for her tormenters, the Lincoln basketball team stood united and did the right thing by intervening. Reports indicated that when play resumed, verbal abuse of the cheerleader ceased.

A team’s united intervention during a game is an antidote worth attention from coaches, school administrators, and the athletes themselves. Intervention may not work all the time because each game and each community is different, but I remain cautiously confident that intervention can work much of the time. Intervention may happen on the spur of the moment during a particular game, as it evidently did in Kenosha. Or intervention may be anticipated if the team has reason beforehand to expect slurs from its fans who might stain the community and inflict undeserved hurt on targeted teammates or opponents.

Respect

Words can sting, and bigotry in sports is never “part of the game.” When slurs from the bleachers target a vulnerable player or team, the slurs disrespect the target’s dignity and personhood. In the America that we should want for ourselves and our families, the sting of bigotry’s verbal assault is no different in a sports arena than on Main Street.

Youth Sports Organizations Should Retire the Name “Midgets”

By Doug Abrams

For a generation and more, various youth sports organizations in the United States and Canada have used the name “Midgets” to identify some age divisions or individual teams. On both sides of the border, the tradition has developed in hockey, football, lacrosse, basketball, and other sports. From my own experiences playing and coaching youth hockey over the years, I remain confident that this usage meant no malicious intent toward adults or children who have a medical condition commonly called dwarfism. (According to the Mayo Clinic, “dwarfism is short stature that results from a genetic or medical condition. Dwarfism is generally defined as an adult height of 4 feet 10 inches or less. The average adult height among people with dwarfism is 4 feet.”).

The name “Midgets,” however, has encountered recent criticism as hurtful and disrespectful to people with dwarfism who face ridicule, discrimination, and even bullying in their daily lives. Some youth sports organizations have retired the name, and others reportedly may follow suit in the near future. Hockey Canada, for example, recently announced that it will review its use of the name, with a decision possible at its Annual Congress in May.

The time has come to retire the name “Midgets” from national, state or provincial, and local youth sports. The name enjoys no enduring loyalty from players or fans, and no inherent relationship to the
rules or regulations of any sport. The hurt inflicted on adults and children with dwarfism can run deep, however, a legacy dating at least from billboards and handbills that routinely advertised “midgets” as star attractions of circus freak shows.

**Traveling a Wholesome Path**

By retiring the name “Midgets,” youth sports organizations would travel a wholesome path similar to the path that Congress and President Obama traveled twice in recent years. In 2016, President Obama signed into law H.R. 4238, which passed the Senate and the House of Representatives unanimously. The bipartisan bill amended two statutes that Congress had enacted in the 1970s. The statutes had referred to persons by such names as Negro, American Indian, Oriental, Eskimo, and Aleut. These names may have been mainstream in the 1970s and before, but not today. H.R. 4238 substituted names such as African American, Native American, Asian American, Hispanic, Pacific Islander, and Alaska Native.

In 2012, President Obama signed into law a similar bipartisan bill that eradicated the acrid name “lunatic” from federal disability law after several decades. The 2012 bill also passed overwhelmingly, unanimously in the Senate and 398-1 in the House.

**Times Change, and Names Matter**

In an age when fierce partisanship divides Congress, the two bipartisan bills recognize the wisdom of replacing outdated names of vulnerable groups. Replacing the name “Midgets” today implies no value judgments about the name’s prior usage. Replacement acknowledges only that, as Congress recognizes, evolving sensitivities normally counsel avoiding outdated names that a vulnerable group’s members commonly disdain today in ordinary communication.

Names once considered mainstream may assume become disfavored with the passage of time. Consider the way that medical literature and most state statutes officially identified adults and children with mental challenges for decades until quite recently. A Florida statute, for example, specified that throughout the state code, “[t]he words ‘lunatic,’ ‘insane persons,’ and other like terms include idiots, lunatics, insane persons, ... and persons of deranged or unsound mind.” Florida did not repeal this statute until 1988.

Legislators in Florida and most other states were not the only prominent government voices that routinely used these harsh terms, and similar harsh terms such as “imbecile” and “feeble-minded.” In 1927, the Supreme Court upheld a state’s decision to involuntary sterilize a young woman whom state authorities and the Court dismissed as “feeble minded.” Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes’ majority
opinion quickly presented the woman's family background. Then, without hint of embarrassment, Justice Holmes wrote that “three generations of imbeciles are enough.”

Medicine and law do not label people as idiots, lunatics, imbeciles, or the like today. These discarded terms are vestiges of a distant past. Times change, and names matter.

**Empathy and Respect**

Like other activities that serve children and adolescents, youth sports is a work in progress. A youth sports organization emerges stronger and more inclusive when it demonstrates empathy and respect for the dignity of a vulnerable group, some of whose children may seek to enroll and play without risking especial ridicule.