

## Ready or Not

Being proactive about sportsmanship is great, but sometimes a school is forced to be reactive. The following stories provide insight into what to do when things do not go quite as planned.

By Laura Ulrich

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Bob Ceplikas, Acting Athletic Director at Dartmouth College, had just left a sports banquet in early December when the bad news came. Another Dartmouth administrator who had been working game security that night told him fan behavior at the contest had gotten out of control and things turned ugly. In the end, Dartmouth students stood accused of verbally assaulting the visiting team and using language that was misogynistic and homophobic. The sport? Squash.

Sara Croney, Superintendent of the Oconto (Wis.) Unified School District, was at her office on a Monday morning in January when the call came. The Oconto High School boys' basketball team had visited rival Sturgeon Bay over the weekend, and the Sturgeon Bay superintendent was telling her he had witnessed the most flagrantly offensive behavior he'd ever seen in his career during the game--from the Oconto coach.

For Jeff Frost, Athletic Director at Waterloo (Iowa) West High School, tough news came in his morning newspaper last fall. Frost had been instrumental in instituting stricter policies governing fan behavior in his district, making changes aimed at enhancing the game experience for all fans. But a *Des Moines Register* article quoted a student-athlete who said the new rules were keeping fans away and killing school spirit.

The issue of sportsmanship is on every athletic director's radar, but at times, problems still come from unexpected directions. In this article, we share how several different schools have handled potentially explosive situations and what they learned from the experiences.

## OUT OF THE BLUE

When Dartmouth hosts a squash match, about 50 spectators usually attend. Behavior problems are unheard of, and Ceplikas says he didn't expect anything out of the ordinary when Harvard visited in early December.

But on that particular night, 300 spectators turned out, 200 of them Dartmouth students. Fans heckled Harvard players and shouted sexist and homophobic slurs, according to witnesses interviewed by the *Boston Globe* and the *Valley News*. "Women on the Harvard team were called 'whores' and 'sluts,' witnesses said; the men were taunted with crude comments about their masculinity," reported the *Globe*. There was one Dartmouth administrator on site, which wasn't enough to keep things under control.

"It was a perfect storm," Ceplikas says. "It was the final day of classes, so a lot of students had free time. We had never beaten Harvard in a regular squash match, but we had beaten them in a preseason scrimmage. And unbeknownst to us, our squash athletes were e-mailing their friends across campus, drumming up a large crowd. These factors came together to create a situation unlike anything we've ever seen in squash, and the result was some very regrettable behavior."

In their initial response, Ceplikas and Dartmouth President Jim Yong Kim focused on reaching out to those who were wronged. Kim apologized to Harvard's president and also called the family of a Harvard co-captain who had been singled out by fans.

Next, they launched a thorough investigation. A member of the school's student affairs office interviewed Dartmouth students at the game as well as Harvard coaches and athletes. Ceplikas was unable to discuss the results of the ongoing investigation or say whether any individuals were likely to be disciplined.

Part of the longer term response has involved looking for ways to better anticipate when an issue might arise in a sport that isn't typically a concern. Improving communication with coaches was one of the first steps. "We're asking our coaches of smaller teams to alert us any time they expect a larger-than-usual crowd so we can increase our administrative and security presence," Ceplikas says.

But most importantly, the incident sparked a campus-wide discussion about standards for fan behavior. Members of the men's soccer team, some of whom were involved in the squash incident, have taken the lead in examining the issue.

Working with the student assembly, student-athlete advisory council, and captains from several sports, the soccer players hosted a forum in January to discuss spectator behavior. A panel was assembled, consisting of Kim, the student assembly president, and current and former Dartmouth student-athletes. In an interactive discussion, attendees and panelists discussed a range of topics, including how to create a home court advantage while staying in the bounds of good sportsmanship.

Ceplikas believes such discussions are extremely important with today's students. "At every level, there is growing acceptance of the idea that it's okay for ordinary people to walk into an athletics venue and turn into raging lunatics," he says. "We now have a generation of students who have grown up seeing this as normal. We absolutely need frank discussions if we're going to tackle that mindset."

The students who organized the forum will continue to meet regularly, and Ceplikas is asking student-athletes to step up to the plate. "If they see someone behaving badly at another sport's contest, we want them to speak up," he says. "I know that's difficult, but we expect them to be leaders in many respects, and this is a challenge we're putting in front of them."

"We can't help but be disappointed in the way some of our students acted at the match," Ceplikas continues. "But we are proud of the way they acknowledged their mistake and are trying to initiate change."

## **COACH CONDUCT**

Students may be allowed to make mistakes when it comes to sportsmanship, but what about a coach? That question came up for Oconto High this winter, when Mike Ruechel, Head Coach of its very successful boys' basketball team, was accused of displaying unacceptable behavior during a game.

When the undefeated Oconto team traveled to play rival Sturgeon Bay in late January, the atmosphere was tense from the start. Not long into the game, excitement turned to antagonism, and according to Sturgeon Bay Superintendent Joe Stutting, who supervised the game, Ruechel's behavior on the bench was not helping.

"He was berating the officials," Stutting says. "Our crowd started yelling for the refs to give him a technical foul. I talked with our student section, urging them not to focus on the other team's coach, and I also talked with one adult who was yelling the loudest and asked him to tone it down."

Late in the game, however, Ruechel did something that Stutting says crossed the line from unprofessional to unacceptable. An Oconto player was ejected from the game for an intentional foul, and Stutting says Ruechel high-fived the player as he left the court, celebrating his ejection.

Sturgeon Bay won the game, but Stutting decided he could not ignore the situation. "I had to go to the Oconto administration," he says. "It's not an easy thing to complain about another school's coach, and I didn't make the decision lightly. But in this case, I felt I had no choice."

On the Monday after the game, Stutting called Croney. He was extremely careful with his approach. "I told her what I had seen, not what she should do," he says. "It would have been easy to make the mistake of demanding that the coach be punished or terminated, but I firmly believed it wasn't my place to tell another administrator what to do."

For Croney, responding to the incident meant being careful and thorough from the start. "I had to be deliberate while acting quickly, since the team was in mid-season and things needed to be resolved as soon as possible," she says.

Croney listened carefully to Stutting's account and then asked him to put it in writing. Next, she got in touch with the school's lawyer. "Our lawyer advised us to inform Coach Ruechel that he would be suspended with pay until we could investigate," she says.

Then Croney began gathering as much information as she could about what had happened. "I interviewed Coach Ruechel and gave him the written complaint from Sturgeon Bay and a copy of the officials' sportsmanship report," she says. "He gave me a list of people he wanted me to interview, and I talked to each of them."

One thing Croney did not do was interview students. "I didn't feel like it would have been appropriate," she says. "This is an adult issue, and I could get a thorough picture of what had happened without putting any kids in a difficult position."

During her investigation, Croney accumulated 54 pages of transcribed interviews. The next step was to pass all the information on to the Oconto school board and schedule a hearing. Following the hearing, the board voted to terminate Ruechel's coaching contract. Ruechel has publicly disagreed with the decision, and said he feels it was in retaliation for past disputes with the school's principal.

Although the situation is not fully resolved, Croney is focusing on moving the community forward. An interim coach was quickly named and she has urged parents and students to continue supporting the team. "I keep pointing out all the good things going on," she says, "and I remind people that our coaches absolutely have to be positive role models."

### **MAKING IT FUN**

During the final minutes of a heated men's basketball game against Gonzaga University, fans from Santa Clara University twice tossed objects onto the court. Both times, officials assessed technical fouls, and both times, Gonzaga converted all four free throws. Santa Clara lost the game, thanks in part to the fans' actions.

The February 2009 incident was an isolated event, according to Jeff Mitchell, Assistant Athletic Director of Compliance and Student Services, but it prompted Santa Clara to think of ways to improve sportsmanship before such behavior turned into a regular pattern. Athletic administrators met with the athletics advisory board to brainstorm ideas and a professor had a suggestion: Why not launch a student video contest, inviting undergraduates to submit videos promoting a sportsmanship message and then show the winning video at home games?

"We quickly realized this could be a positive way to engage our students," Mitchell says. "Rather than us preaching to them, we'd let them come up with the message themselves."

In the spring of 2009, athletic administrators teamed up with the school's Office of Student Life. They developed ground rules for the competition, secured prize money to award to the winners from a fund supporting campus spirit initiatives, and worked with the university's legal counsel to clarify copyright issues. During the summer and early fall, the committee put the word out.

"We promoted the contest through athletics, student life, and the student government," Mitchell says. "We used e-mail and Facebook and put postings all over campus."

The finished videos were due in mid-November, and four were good enough to be considered for the top spot. In early December, the school held a sportsmanship forum where it unveiled the final videos. Next, the videos were posted online and voting was opened to all undergraduate students. More than 800 unique votes were logged.

The team that created the winning video was awarded \$1,500, while the second place team received \$750, and the third place team got \$500. The top video debuted at Santa Clara's first men's basketball conference game of the season and was played at the team's subsequent home games.

"Our student attendance at men's basketball games has been through the roof and fan behavior has been phenomenal," Mitchell says. "The contest created a buzz, and we feel it made a big difference."

Next year, the stakes will increase. The winners will see their spot aired during game telecasts. Instead of submitting a finished video, teams will submit samples of their work and the winner will be joined with a faculty mentor to create a television-quality product. "We want to find students who can put a lot of time into it," Mitchell says, "and we're working to make it count toward class or internship credit."

For other schools thinking of launching a video contest, Mitchell encourages involving as many constituencies across campus as you can. "Student life was critical because they have the means to communicate with the entire student body," he says. "Getting faculty involved is important for their support. And keeping our student-athlete advisory board in the loop really helped get our athletes excited about the contest."

"The topic of fan behavior can have some tension around it," Mitchell continues. "Approaching it in a creative way that fosters buy-in from students, instead of lecturing them about what they can and can't do, really makes a difference."

To view the top four videos, visit: <http://www.scu.edu/studentlife/osl/pbpvoting.cfm>.

### **IMPLEMENTING NEW RULES**

While student buy-in is great, sometimes sportsmanship initiatives need to come from the top down. And sometimes, administrators need to take the heat for being the bad guys. Frost learned this last fall when he launched an effort to strengthen fan behavior policies at Waterloo West.

"For a while there, I was known as 'Frost the Fun Hater,'" he says. "It was an interesting period."

Frost's look at sportsmanship rules was prompted by a security audit undertaken by his district. An independent firm was hired to review policies and facilities at the school and generate a report outlining areas where it could improve. As part of the process, auditors met with Frost, toured the athletic facilities, and asked questions about policies and enforcement.

"They felt there were some things we could do to make sure our game day atmosphere was safe for all our fans--grandparents as well as students," Frost says. "We decided an overhaul of our policies was in order."

The newly articulated rules address several areas. First, they prohibit all signs and banners in the stands. "We went with a total ban because it's clear and easy to enforce," Frost says. "We don't want administrators making judgment calls on whether a sign is positive, because there are often innuendos they aren't aware of."

The new rules govern chants as well. "The only chants allowed are along the lines of, 'Stand up, be proud,'" Frost says. "We prohibit any chants that are negative or about specific players, as well as chanting back and forth with the visiting fans."

The new policy also prohibits Waterloo fans from mingling with opposing fans and requires middle school students to be accompanied by an adult. A provision requiring students to wear their school ID tags also led administrators to ban all body paint, although that prohibition was later eased.

"We feel it's important to be able to identify our students, and when they have their faces painted, it defeats the purpose of the ID tags," Frost says. "With that purpose in mind, we amended the rules to allow arm and leg paint, eye black, tattoos, and symbols on the face as long as they don't interfere with identifying the student."

Frost rolled out the rules last fall, announcing them in parent meetings and at a season kick-off event, and sending them home in writing. He also read the entire policy on the PA system during the school day before Waterloo's first football game.

"There was a groan throughout the building," he says. "It was funny, because these rules are not terribly different from the ones we already had, and we didn't have large numbers of kids who were violating them anyway. But when they heard there were new rules, suddenly it was an issue."

The *Des Moines Register* ran a story about the new policies, quoting a football player who said the rules weren't "doing anything but hurting school spirit." Frost also fielded calls from parents who were concerned about the changes.

"I had to decide how to respond, and it was a tough decision: Do I address the complaints directly or just see if they fade away?" he says. "I decided to keep a close eye on the situation but not address it directly. I waited for our first game to see what happened."

"We didn't need to turn anybody away at that game and, for the most part, everyone followed the rules," he continues. "We did need to do some enforcing, but when we reminded our students of the rules, they complied."

About three weeks into the football season, Frost says, he no longer heard complaints. "I'm glad that I just let the comments fade away," he says. "If I'd overreacted and taken it personally, I could have made it more of a problem than it was."

Frost also believes it was important to show he was willing to compromise by amending the face paint rule. "That showed students we weren't out to ruin their fun, and we were willing to listen to their side," he says. "It helped them buy into the rest of the rules."

Although there were some bumps in the road, Frost is glad he took on the job of clarifying the rules. "After the initial response, we've seen record crowds of students at our events," he says. "They're still vocal, but now it's much more positive."

## **CREATING A CULTURE**

After the well-publicized ponytail pull by a University of New Mexico women's soccer player during a match last fall, upgrading sportsmanship in the sport has been on a lot of athletic directors' minds. The Neumann University women's soccer squad provides a great example of how to do it right.

For two years running, the team has won the National Soccer Coaches Association of America Gold Team Ethics Award, given to teams that don't receive any yellow or red cards during the entire season.

In 2009, only nine teams across all three NCAA divisions earned this distinction, and even more impressive, the Neumann team went card-free while posting its best win-loss record ever.

Head Coach Jeremy Brodovsky believes the award is the result of an overall emphasis on creating the right team culture. "I have three guiding principles for our team: respect, responsibility, and integrity," he says. "We start talking about these at the beginning of the season and they shape everything we do."

"Respect" is the key word Brodovsky uses when he talks to his team about interacting with officials. "I teach them to respect the referee's position, whether or not they think the referee is doing a good job," he says. "I coach them to speak very respectfully to the officials, if they need to talk to them at all."

Brodovsky also prepares his players to handle a call that doesn't go their way by talking about it before it happens. "I tell them to think of the referees like any other aspect of the game they can't control," he says. "I ask them, 'Is it raining? Is the field narrow? Is it cold? These are things you have no influence over, and officiating is the same. Don't waste your energy getting angry about calls you don't like. Accept it and move on.'"

He also coaches his athletes on responding to clashes with opposing players, whether it's a hard foul or a nasty comment. "I tell them never to retaliate," Brodovsky says. "It's part of having integrity, but it's practical, too. The player who retaliates is the one who's going to end up with a card, not the player who initiated the problem."

There is also a strict team rule on swearing--it is not allowed. "This might seem unrelated to sportsmanship, but it's an important part of establishing our team culture," Brodovsky says. "A player's language is something she can control and it requires using the self-discipline we're trying to achieve. It means they have to think before they act."

Players are then reminded about sportsmanship during pregame talks. "We make it one of our goals each game not to get any red or yellow cards," Brodovsky says. "We don't talk specifically about the award. We just focus on not getting any cards that day."

Such admonishments will do little good, however, if the coach doesn't set the right example. "I tell them I don't gauge our success by whether we win or lose," he says. "As long as they play to their capability, and strive a little beyond that, I am happy. Knowing that helps them keep their cool when things aren't going well."

As Neumann's 2009 season illustrated, playing with class doesn't mean giving anything up competitively. According to Brodovsky, that's because the skills required to play with sportsmanship are the same ones needed to win games.

"I tell my players that sportsmanship is about self-discipline and being in control of your responses, and no athlete is successful without those two attributes," he says. "I remind them that the best coaches and athletes in the world know how to control themselves and their reactions. There is no reason we can't be a team that wins games and ethics awards at the same time."

### Sidebar: **AS A LEAGUE**

When a school tries to improve sportsmanship, one of the biggest stumbling blocks can be the concern that it may find itself at a disadvantage with opponents. How is it fair, students often wonder, that when we play at another school their fans do whatever they can to distract us, but when they come to our place, we aren't allowed to do the same?

One solution is to get all conference members on the same page, and the Mississippi Valley Conference, a collection of 14 high schools in Iowa's largest class, has found a recipe that works. It promotes its league-wide seasonal sportsmanship award as the most sought-after accolade in the conference, channeling its schools' competitive drive to improve behavior.

Under the program, officials rate the sportsmanship of coaches, players, and fans in selected sports on a scale of one to five following each contest. They also have the option of writing a short narrative to explain their ratings. The rating forms are then sent to Conference Commissioner Randy Krejci, who keeps track of the scores.

Midway through each season, Krejci updates schools on their standings, and when the season concludes, the school with the best score is awarded a trophy, which it keeps for a year. The fall season covers football and volleyball, winter includes basketball and wrestling, and spring/summer targets soccer, softball, and baseball.

Simply knowing they're being watched and ranked at each contest changes people's behavior markedly, according to Jeff Frost, Athletic Director at Waterloo (Iowa) West High School, which has held trophies for three out of the past four seasons. Another key is making sure administrators and coaches emphasize the award's value.

"Our trophies are displayed very prominently, and every time we have an assembly, I bring them out and talk about how proud we are of them," Frost says. "I tell our coaches that our athletes and fans are going to decide how much to value it based on how much the coaches care. And I remind people that they're being rated at the beginning of contests."

For a conference contemplating starting a similar program, Krejci recommends getting everyone's input from the start. "You also need one person who is willing to compile and compute the scores," he says. "I use a pencil-and-paper system, but it could be computerized."

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