

Fox Business

Friday, Feb. 1 2008

Interactive Game Tries to Teach How to Deal with Sports Rage

*Donna Fuscaldo
FOXBusiness*

New York -- Northwestern Lehigh School District in Pennsylvania is typical of most schools in the country. Sure they have rowdy fans and, yes, they have had to eject fans from the stands from time to time, but the rate was always average.

That was until last year when the school district saw the number of fan ejections during sporting events fall to zero, all because of an interactive, Internet-based game making the rounds at elementary and high schools across the country. Called the Star Sportsmanship, this interactive game aims to teach students, coaches and even parents how to properly conduct themselves during sporting events.

“Sportsmanship awareness was me standing in front of a crowd preaching what to do and what not to do,” said Jason Zimmerman, director of athletics and student activities at Northwestern Lehigh School District. “This was unlike anything else. It’s an interactive game that not only addresses sportsmanship but its good for decision making...and how to treat other people.”

The Star Sportsmanship program, developed by educational digital-game publisher Learning Through Sports of Birmingham, Ala., puts students, coaches and parents through a series of interactive situations and probes them to answer what they would do in each scenario.

The modules are designed to be age specific, and while it’s not mandatory that parents engage in the interactive game, some schools are making it a requirement for students and coaches. Sports rage among fans and parents isn’t anything new. But as bad behavior on the part of athletes and fans becomes more prominent, schools are looking for unique ways to combat it.

“24/7 media coverage allows children at a young age to see their role models in a different light,” said Brian Shulman, founder and chief executive officer of Learning Through Sports, who created the Star Sportsmanship program. “There’s no shortage of famous athletes behaving poorly.”

Shulman and other experts said to combat sports rage, it’s not enough to simply hang up a sign at the games with the rules of conduct or make parents and students sign a paper promising to behave. Nor is it realistic to think the children’s role models—major league athletes—will all of a sudden behave better. They say teaching children how to behave on a consistent basis and starting at a young age is the most effective way to send the message.

“For a lot of organizations, sportsmanship is about fluff,” said Shulman. “It’s putting up posters and talking about being nice with each other. That didn’t work. It’s got to be result driven.”

At Northwestern Lehigh School District, Zimmerman said he was impressed with the result of Star Sportsmanship. At first he was apprehensive to use the interactive game. After all, this generation of school-age children grew up on Sony PlayStation and Nintendo Wii.

Zimmerman feared the lack of cutting-edge graphics with the Star Sportsmanship interactive game would turn off students. But, to Zimmerman's surprise, the program was a success, albeit a short lived one.

Northwestern Lehigh School District didn't have to give fans warnings because the interactive game was "fresh in their minds," said Zimmerman, noting that students behaved themselves during basketball season, which is the toughest to manage since fans are confined in a small area.

But since Northwestern Lehigh School District was part of a pilot program and hasn't used the interactive game again, some bad behavior has started to crop up.

"They're not getting it on a regular basis, so they're slipping a bit," said Zimmerman, noting it's a program that should be implemented on a regular basis. "We've gotten away from the x's and o's of how to act as individuals so this gave it to them in a quiet entertaining way."