

# **The Epidemic of Poor Sportsmanship and its Impact in our Communities**

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A primary goal of physical education and youth athletics is to promote good sportsmanship. However, there is a growing concern that participation in physical education and youth sports may actually impede the development of good sportsmanship. With an overemphasis on "win at all costs," we neglect the development of sportsmanship values in our students (Green & Gabbard, 1999). Sports participation provides an opportunity to teach sports skills as well as important life skills such as honesty, conflict resolution, and respect for authority (Rasmussen, 1999). Good sportsmanship can be taught with a positive effect on social behaviors in other settings, such as the classroom (Sharpe, Brown, & Crider, 1995).

From little league to professional sports, there is either an increase in poor sporting behaviors or a more heightened awareness of it. The Maine Sports Summit of 2004 gathered athletes and coaches to identify issues in interscholastic sports that are detrimental to a healthy experience. Among the issues identified were bad attitudes, lack of respect, parental politics, negative comments and inappropriate behaviors by parents and fans, win at all cost attitudes, and the media's role of glorifying negative behavior at sporting events (University of Maine News Release, March 9, 2004). The National Association of Sports Officials (NASO) presented 85 descriptions of poor sporting incidents reported to their association (Still, 2004). Included are parents who have body-slammed referees, fans who have threatened or physically attacked umpires and referees, players who have beaten referees, little league coaches who have physically attacked umpires, physical attacks between players, little league players who were bribed by a coach to "take out another player," and cases when rage led to someone's death. These outrageous incidents occurred throughout the nation in a variety of sports including pee wee, little league, middle school, high school, and college. Barry Mano, NASO President, indicated that NASO receives at least 100 reports such as these each year and that they are only the "tip of the iceberg" of poor sporting incidents (Still, 2004).

Participation and competition in sports offer many opportunities for coaches and teachers to capitalize on teachable moments for promoting good sportsmanship behaviors (Shields, Bredemeier, & Power, 2001). Positive sportsmanship behaviors include good decision-making, cooperation, effort, conflict resolution, leadership,

respect for other players and authority, and being a good winner and loser (Tenoschok, 2001; Sharpe, Brown, & Crider, 1995). In order for students to learn good sportsmanship behaviors, it must be systematically taught (Green & Gabbard, 1999). As a component of a year long physical education program, Sharpe, Brown, and Crider (1995) demonstrated that the delivery of an ongoing sportsmanship curriculum increased good sportsmanship behaviors and that the positive behaviors generalized to other school settings. Students demonstrated an increase in student leadership, conflict resolution, and on-task behaviors in the classroom.

**Providing such instruction in physical education settings is particularly appealing in light of the naturally interactive, conflict-oriented setting that team sports provide. If positive social behavior can be specified and taught at an early age and appropriately generalized, then a powerful academic tool may be available to help to curtail the incidence of unresolved conflict and violence with children and youth (Sharpe, Brown, & Crider, p.414).**

In order to be effective, sportsmanship education must be taught through an ongoing curriculum targeted for elementary through secondary students (Gibbons, Ebbeck, & Weiss, 1995; Green & Gabbard, 1999). Schools and youth sports programs typically have policy statements regarding the importance of good sportsmanship (Ritacco & Kerr, 1998). These policies are often supported by good sportsmanship posters, good sportsmanship pledges to be signed by players and parents, and possibly a sportsmanship video. One shot discussions and signed pledges do not provide the instructional support needed to improve sportsmanship. Effective instruction for good sportsmanship requires both thinking and reasoning programs, role models, a supportive environment, and the commitment of community members (Beller, 2002). Students, teachers, coaches, and parents should be involved in order to achieve the most impact (Bennett, M., 2002; Marlowe, 2001; Kanters & Tebbutt, 2001; Shields, Bredemeier & Power, 2001)

## **STAR Sportsmanship: An Educational Solution**

Star Sportsmanship, developed by Learning Through Sports, is an innovative and comprehensive solution for teaching good sportsmanship. This award-winning web-based instructional program captivates students with contemporary graphics and situations relevant to sportsmanship. Students are provided with many opportunities to make decisions regarding sportsmanship situations. The STAR metaphor provides students with a thinking strategy for decision-making. Students are taught to STOP before making an unwise decision, THINK how their action affects themselves and others, ACT promptly to demonstrate good sportsmanship and REPLAY how they handled the situation and learn from it. Professional sports celebrities are role models who deliver video messages regarding the importance of good sportsmanship with examples. The secondary versions of STAR provide an in-depth curriculum related to substance abuse, with a strong emphasis on the dangers of steroid use. STAR Sportsmanship provides a sportsmanship curriculum designed for the entire community, including coaches and parents. Our nation can no longer afford to neglect this epidemic of poor sportsmanship. The solution is education and the time is now.

\*\*\*Addendum: June 2009\*\*\*

STAR Sportsmanship has produced positive results across the nation in classrooms and on sporting fields. At East Elementary in Cullman, Alabama, Principal David Wiggins reported a 90% decrease in behavioral incidences by students over a three-year period of using STAR Sportsmanship. East Elementary implemented STAR in 2005-06, when 267 behavioral incidences were recorded for the school year. By February 2009, only 28 incidences were recorded at the school.

In 2008, the Alabama High School Athletic Association (AHSAA) and the Mississippi High School Activities Association (MHSAA) both mandated the STAR Sportsmanship program statewide as an eligibility requirement for student-athletes competing at the high school level. The State of Alabama first piloted the STAR program in 2005 and by 2008 achieved a 55% decrease in high school sports ejections over the three-year period. The State of Mississippi first piloted STAR in 2007 and by 2008 reported a 44% decrease in player ejections and a 50% decrease in coach ejections.

Details of these proven results and other STAR Success Stories can be viewed on the STAR Sportsmanship website, [www.ltsstar.com](http://www.ltsstar.com).

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