



Sportsmanship: Beyond Sports

Some people define good sportsmanship as the "golden rule" of sports — in other words, treating the people you play with and against as you'd like to be treated yourself. You demonstrate good sportsmanship when you show respect for yourself, your teammates, and your opponents, for the coaches on both sides, and for the referees, judges, and other officials.

But sportsmanship isn't just reserved for the people on the field. Cheerleaders, fans, and parents also need to be aware of how they behave during competition. Sportsmanship is a style and an attitude, and it can have a positive influence on everyone around you. There are 3 vitally important parts to good sportsmanship and how it can be carried beyond the fields.

R-E-S-P-E-C-T

Respecting your opponent, as well as your team, coaches, officials, and the game, is paramount to good sportsmanship. The concept of respecting individuals is easily understood. This is where the **Golden Rule** comes in; treating others as you would want to be treated. But how do you respect a team as a whole or the game itself?

Respecting your team can be stated as **putting team goals ahead of your own**. We all probably have had at least one teammate that was obsessed with his or her personal statistics but less interested in how the team performed. These teammates are often seen as detrimental to team chemistry because they may cause resentment and distrust. The opposite is the athlete who follows the team's game plan and is willing to take on the role that the coach feels is best for the team. Good team members also **pick up their teammates** when they fail. Sports are full of failure. Star baseball players fail to get a hit 7 of 10 times; star Basketball players miss 50% of their shots; and even the best quarterbacks throw interceptions. Encouragement and support can range from a pat on the back to a few comforting words or even a brief conversation to make sure the player's head is in the game and not focused on the recent failure.

Respecting the game is a notion that can stump both kids and adults when put on the spot, but it is important to our overall understanding of sportsmanship. The first part of respecting the game is **learning and understanding the rules**. This seems simple enough, but it is often over looked. We may all be familiar with major team sports such as football, basketball and baseball, but youth leagues rarely play by exactly the same rules. Differences may be found in minimum playing time rules, adjusted equipment/field sizes,

or rule changes meant to benefit the young or less skilled. These variations are thought out to match the goals and mission of the individual league or activity. Being unaware and/or openly complaining about these differences is disrespectful to the game and flies in the face of good sportsmanship. That doesn't mean you can't be an agent for change. Well-run leagues should always welcome constructive criticism and ideas presented in a respectful manner.

The next part of respecting the game is **always trying your best**. If you are not trying your best, you're disrespecting your team as well as the game. Even the best pro athletes make embarrassing errors, but they are not nearly as embarrassing as having a negative outcome due to lack of hustle. Plus, as most coaches would attest, a complete team hustling (doing their best) has the advantage of team unity. Finally, **taking care of equipment, wearing uniforms properly, and being punctual** to practices and games are all signs of participants who respect their teams, coaches and the game.

Losing with Dignity

No matter how much we would like to, we can't win at everything every time. So we need to learn to deal with it. After a hard fought game in which everything was left on the field of play in a losing effort, it can be very difficult to look your opponents in the eye and tell them "good game" or "good job". But this is what is often asked of athletes of all ages. So how do we handle losing with dignity? **Keep losing in perspective**. Youth sports are a learning experience. They are supposed to be fun experiences where friends are made and sports specific skills are learned. Very few wins and losses are remembered, even a short time later. Always **accept responsibility for the loss**. There are many aspects of sports that are beyond our control (ref's calls, lucky plays/shots, injuries). So why focus on these? We all have heard many players and coaches blaming the officiating for a loss. But upon close inspection, the complainer would discover many opportunities to improve that were in his or her control (poor pitching for example), which next time may keep a game from hinging on a perceived bad call. It has been said that the difference between a good athlete and a great athlete is his/her ability to learn from failure. It is also important to **acknowledge the winner**. It may be difficult but failing to acknowledge your competitor's accomplishment is disrespectful. Sulking away shows a self-centeredness and lack of discipline. Being able to control your emotions in difficult moments are a mark of strength and self-control. Finally, when you lose, **keep your head up**. If you gave it your best shot, you should feel pride about your effort, not shame over disappointing results or execution. Remember perspective; it's just a game.

Winning with Humility

Winning is fun. It is often seen as the reward for our hard work, and it fills us with pride. When we participate in a sport that keeps score it is our **obligation to do our best to win**. As you recall, respecting your team and the game includes doing your best.

However, if you were to make a list of team goals in youth/recreational sports, winning should always be below things like fun, exercise, making friends/fellowship, improving skills etc. Winning becomes a negative when it is a team's or individual's only goal. When this happens, most of the benefits of youth/recreational sports are lost. This ties in to winning with humility because, like losing, we must also **keep winning in perspective**. Winning doesn't mean you were perfect; there are always areas we can improve. This does not mean we can't celebrate our victories with our teammates, coaches, friends and families, but **celebrate with grace**. We should keep in mind that our opponent is simultaneously facing a disappointment. Since we all have experienced tough losses, it should be easy to have a healthy **empathy for the losing team**. However, striking that balance between sincerely enjoying your accomplishment, while not adding to your competitor's dejection, can be extremely difficult. A good start is to **acknowledge the losing team**. Let your opponents know that they were worthy adversaries, pointing out specific points of the game in which they excelled. Victory is cheapened when you dismiss your opponent's worthiness.

Sportsmanship and the Game of Life

How do the lessons of sports and sportsmanship relate to life? One of the goals of parents, schools, and coaches is to help develop children into productive, happy, well-adjusted members of society. Look back at the bolded words and phrases of this article relating to respecting individuals, your team and the game. Now instead of thinking of them simply in relation to sports, think of them in relation to almost any profession or job. What employer wouldn't want employees who:

- Treat everyone with respect
- Put business goals ahead of their own
- Pick up their co-workers
- Learn and understand the business
- Always try their best
- Take care of company property and equipment
- Wear uniforms properly (dress appropriately)
- Be punctual

Like life, sports are tough and not always fair. Therefore sports can be a wonderful training ground for life's challenges. Just like we all win some and lose some in sports, we also deal with plenty of successes and failures in our lives.

Failures in sports, as in life, should not be debilitating, but a path to greater wisdom and a motivational tool to succeed. Thomas Edison was asked if he felt like a failure for his inability to create a successful light bulb after 9000 failed attempts. Perplexed, Edison replied, "Young man, why would I feel like a failure? And

why would I ever give up? I now know definitively over 9,000 ways that an electric light bulb will not work. Success is almost in my grasp." Shortly after that, and another 1000 attempts, Edison invented the light bulb. Our greatest successes in life are not the ones that come easily but the ones we had to work the hardest to achieve. We are often inspired by those who have faced the most difficult of life's challenges and have still persevered with dignity and grace.

Winning in life may mean a big promotion over a coworker, scoring the sale with the big commission, or winning an election. As in winning in sports, these are times when humility is better received than boasting. Although there may be bad blood with those who were less successful, nothing is gained by rubbing in our success. It may not be too long before you are on the other side and people will remember your actions.

We should continuously strive to improve ourselves in life, just as in sports. We are never a finished product. Those who respect others, handle failure with grace, and manage success with humility, will not only be better teammates and employees. They will also be viewed as leaders on their teams, in their professions and in their communities. It is a priority of the many youth programs, leagues and camps affiliated with Morgan County Parks and Recreation to arm staff, parents, and coaches with the tools, knowledge and framework for instilling a full understanding of sportsmanship and its importance.

For more information on sportsmanship visit:

www.nays.org

www.bjupress.com/.../articles/t2t/need-for-good-sportsmanship.php

<http://www.pelinks4u.org/articles/darden/sportsmanship.htm>

<http://kidshealth.org/parent/emotions/behavior/sportsmanship.html>

Thanks,

Hartselle Dixie Youth Board Members