

# CIVILITY ON THE SIDELINE

## Youth Sports take steps to hush up unruly parent spectators

By **JESSICA GARRISON**

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Fed up with the abusive and occasionally violent behavior on the sidelines of youth sports, athletic officials are clamping down on unruly mothers and fathers with a spate of measures that range from subtle embarrassments to seminars in etiquette.

- Several soccer coaches are dishing out lollipops to rowdy parents, with firm instructions to keep their mouths shut until the candy has dissolved.
- At football games this fall, many public high schools in California will slap yellow cards into the hands of overzealous moms and dads. Distributed through the California Interscholastic Federation, the wording on the cards warns parents that if they don't quiet down, they will be escorted from the game.
- For the first time, the Los Angeles Unified School District this year is urging coaches to send a letter home with every athlete, detailing parental etiquette at games.
- And in Northern California, the city of Roseville will require parents of children in municipal sports leagues to attend lessons in sportsmanship.

Two years into a state wide effort to improve in high school athletics, the interscholastic federation has concluded that parents need training as badly as the kids do.

Coaches of off-campus youth leagues could have told them that a long time ago. Over the summer, two American Youth Soccer Organization teams were harmed after a parental melee in San Juan Capistrano, Calif. In Massachusetts last year, one father killed another after a fight in the stands at a youth hockey game. A Northridge, Calif., father was sent to jail in January after attacking his son's Little League coach and threatening to hit him.

"We have had some terrible, hurtful behavior from parents," said Michael Josephson, president of the Josephson Institute for Ethics, which is backing the yellow-card gimmick as part of its citizenship program for high school athletes. "We will not tolerate this behavior."

### **Parents get yellow-card warnings**

Roger Blake, head of education and training for the interscholastic federation, got the idea of yellow-carding parents when he was athletic director for the Lake Elsinore, Calif., schools and charged with forcibly escorting obscenity yelling parents out of games. During one such walk from the field to the parking lot with an angry dad, Blake noticed a referee hand a yellow card to an out-of-line player, a standard practice for soccer players.

Blake figured the embarrassment of getting the cards might work as well on adults as on children. As a result, the Lake Elsinore schools have "carded" parents for the last three years.

This fall, the cards will be recommended to every school in California; principals can decide whether to adopt the practice. Many are expected to, as 40 percent of schools in the state have adopted the Josephson Institute's Pursuing Victory with Honor program, designed to promote sportsmanship among players and coaches.

Victory with Honor calls for athletes and coaches to sign contracts promising good citizenship. But while it quickly turned around the behavior of athletes, the project did little for parental misdeeds, Josephson said. While adults have refrained from highly publicized fisticuffs at high school games, the level of invective from the bleachers has risen, coaches say, possibly because of the lure of athletic scholarships to college has raised the ante.

"You have a captive audience with coaches and athletes," said Barbara Fiege, director of interscholastic athletics for the Los Angeles schools, which participates in the Pursuing Victory with Honor program. "You don't have that with parents"

Every athletic director in the district has been told about the yellow cards and can use them if he or she sees fit, Fiege said.

Coaches and parents at youth games welcome such steps as they watch increasing numbers of grown-ups erupt in toddler-style tantrums.

"It's awful. "It's terrible. It's a huge problem," said Terry Lowe, assistant coach of the Teal Titans, a California Youth Soccer Association team.

Her daughter, Nicole Zabielski-Lowe, 13, said some of the worst moments of her life have been spent running down the soccer field, chased by the shouts of parents on both sides.

"Parents from the other team will yell and say, "Good job missing that shot; you're helping our team," she said. "Parents act like you're going to lose a million bucks. They yell at the coach, the whole team, and everyone is upset"

At another soccer practice, every one of the dozen parents watching their daughters could recite a litany of incidents at athletic events.

There was the dad who punched the coach because his child wasn't getting enough playing time. There were the parents who reduced a 12-year-old referee to tears with their insults over calls they didn't like.

This year, their coach, Dave Cochran, seized upon a strategy that has become popular around California: the lollipop defense.

***"We come to soccer games with a big bowl of suckers. If there's a parent who is coaching too much, I hand 'em a sucker."***

**Dave Cochran**  
SOCCER COACH

"We come to soccer games with a big bowl of suckers," he said. "If there's a parent who is coaching too much, I hand 'em a sucker."

Roseville has agreed to mandate that all parents of children in city recreational programs take spectator behavior classes, said Roni Garrison, the city's parks and recreation technician. City officials have not yet decided whether they will banish children whose parents don't attend.

This fall, the AYSO, which long considered its fields bastions of good citizenship, will roll out a program called "Kids Zone" in which parents pledge not to disrupt games.

Kids Zone began in the spring in San Diego, after parents became concerned about rising levels of verbal abuse.

A July brawl in San Juan Capistrano involving more than 30 adults who bit and punched each other sent shudders through the soccer organization and has prompted chapters all over the country to sign up.

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