

GOOD SPORTS? CHILDISH BEHAVIOR FOUND IN STANDS

By Mark Stewart
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Many soccer fields in Montgomery County last weekend were filled with athletes, coaches and parents, but little noise. Coaches were able to talk to their players, and players talked to their teammates, but there was virtually no interaction between the players and those on the sidelines.

It was the latest incarnation of a concept called "Silent Saturday" that Anne Arundel County tried in January and more and more youth leagues across the country are considering to curb obnoxious, aggressive and sometimes even violent behavior by parents and spectators.

"We want the kids to make their own choices and decisions on the field," says Jim Gordon, commissioner of Montgomery Soccer Inc. "We'd like the kids to see what it's like to be able to play without distractions."

"Silent Saturday" may sound extreme — even its promoters agree with that — but many youth sports participants and experts say something needs to be done to combat what they see as a growing and festering problem.

'A major, major problem'

Boisterous and obnoxious "Little League parents" and "soccer parents" have been around for as long as youth sports, but as the sports leagues have grown bigger, the horror stories about out-of-control parents have grown worse, too.

Last year, a soccer mother in Greensboro, N.C., was fined and sentenced to probation and community service after hitting a teen-age referee after a game. Also last year, a father in Cleveland punched a 15-year-old boy during a soccer game because he said the player was pushing around his son.

Closer to home, the Calvert County (Md.) Department of Recreation canceled its basketball playoffs for a few years, partly because of concerns about fan conduct, and the Virginia Youth Soccer Association has handled 15 to 20 cases of assault and abuse toward referees in the past three years, state president Jim Ferguson says.

"Nationally, it's a major, major problem," Mr. Ferguson says. "Soccer, I think, is in danger of becoming the Little League Baseball of the new millennium."

Jeff Leslie, president of the nonprofit Jupiter Tequesta Athletic Association in Jupiter, Fla., and a parent, wasn't going to let that happen on his watch. After hearing a number of disturbing reports about parental behavior at games and seeing some examples, Mr. Leslie took action.

In February, Jupiter became the first local youth sports organization to require parents to attend a class in sportsmanship. The class includes watching a 20-minute video and signing an 11-point code of ethics.

"We had incidents of kids crying and breaking down, and we were concerned because we felt a lot of it was brought on by their parents," Mr. Leslie says. "We had a lot of situations where parents got into shouting matches. We had not had a physical conflict, but we felt it was going to happen sooner or later."

Fred Engh, a parent and president of the nonprofit National Alliance of Youth Sports in West Palm Beach, Fla., about 15 miles from Jupiter, says Jupiter's decision should be emulated by every youth sports group in the country.

"No organization that runs sports for children should allow parents to register their child without the parent going through an orientation and training program on ethics and sportsmanship," says Mr. Engh, whose organization creates and distributes literature such programs for youth sports coaches, parents and administrators.

'A one-day awareness'

Last fall, the Anne Arundel County Department of Parks and Recreation for the first time asked parents to sign a pledge when they enrolled their children in sports, acknowledging they are role models for their children and agreeing to encourage their children to play by the rules. But the county decided it wasn't enough.

"Our crowd behavior has been a problem for years," says Franklin Chaney, a recreation administrator for the department. "One of our sports supervisors had heard about this silent weekend idea, and we discussed it and decided to try it in Anne Arundel."

On Jan. 22 and 23, the only sounds filling the basketball gyms in Anne Arundel County were the tweets and squeaks of referees' whistles and players' shoes. Coaches weren't even allowed to yell instructions to their players. Parents were allowed to converse among themselves in the stands but not yell at the referees or players.

Naturally, "Silent Saturday" got plenty of media attention, and parents filled the editorial pages of the local papers for the next few days expressing support or outrage.

"My view was, it wasn't a long-term solution, but they were making a statement," says Edward Harding of Lothian, Md., a parent and former coach and referee in Anne Arundel County. "I haven't gone to a game in a while, but from the things I've heard, it's getting pretty bad."

Mr. Harding worked as an official for a while five years ago, just after he got out of college, and says it was hard for him to curb parents' behavior.

"It was tough for somebody young like me in that position," he says. "It was scary."

Mr. Chaney says referee recruitment and retention was one of the reasons "Silent Saturday" was imposed. Fan and parent behavior was discouraging potential referees to the point that it was endangering the county's schedule.

"The worst situation is where you have two teams that show up all excited to play and there's no ref," Mr. Chaney says. "A lot of times we have 16-, 17-year-old kids out there officiating by themselves, and coaches have free rein. It's a very difficult situation. We thought we would do [Silent Saturday] in our basketball program, where we do have staff on hand during games, as a one-day awareness for the public to know we do have some problems."

In Calvert County, parks and recreation manager Doug Meadows says his organization tries to handle incidents "as they come up," but parents' and fans' behavior has been "99.9 percent positive."

"We try to make everyone aware of what the purpose is, which is education and to have fun, and the problems are generally isolated," Mr. Meadows says.

'Fear, ego and greed'

Mr. Engh says a surge of "hyperparenting" is fueling the wave of violence and pressure in youth sports.

"We have fear, ego and greed," Mr. Engh says. "We, as parents, fear that our child is going to sit on the bench or be the one who strikes out, and I'm going to do very strange things to prevent that."

"Ego: It's not Billy up at bat, it's not Mary Ann getting ready to kick the soccer ball, it's me out there doing it. So many people have played youth sports and were failures, they say to themselves, 'It's not going to happen again.'"

"And greed has crept into our society. We take our kid who has just learned how to tie his shoes but is now exhibiting tremendous talent in some sport, and we say, 'I can see him playing for the [Washington] Wizards.' So we say, 'Billy, Mom and I have seen how well you play ball, so therefore we want you to specialize in basketball. We've got you signed up for another league, then after this league is over, we've got you signed up for a basketball camp and two or three other places.'"

Mr. Ferguson traces this mentality to the gymnastics craze of the 1970s, fueled by Nadia Comaneci's Olympic success, and later by America's Mary Lou Retton in the 1980s.

"We started talking about how early these girls were identified and how early their training started and how hard it was and how important it was to get them where they were," Mr. Ferguson says. "They were world-class by the time they were 14. And then we read about swimmers getting up at 4 a.m. when they were 8 years old, and I think it all transferred over and got us. Now we have kids playing soccer at 4 years old, and I know of some parents who want competitive soccer at 6 years old."

On top of that, Mr. Ferguson says, he thinks the Washington area has a higher percentage of Type A people that become the classic "soccer moms and dads."

Parents aren't the only culprits, some say. Bob Marshaus of Clinton, a veteran basketball referee and commissioner of the Maryland Basketball Officials Association, says coaches are the prime culprits.

"I'm a firm believer that everything stems from the coach," says Mr. Marshaus, who is also a parent. "If a coach yells at an official, he's like a cheerleader. Fans see that, and they start screaming at the officials. Granted, you'll have some fans that will scream no matter what, but if many of them see the coach doing it, they figure it's OK for me to scream, too."

Mr. Marshaus says TV sports coverage feeds into that mentality, too. He told about a middle school game he officiated a few years ago in which he was forced to eject a coach just eight seconds into the game for arguing with him and his partner. Afterward, Mr. Marshaus said, the coach approached him and defended his actions by saying, "Gary Williams does it." Mr. Williams is the fiery University of Maryland men's basketball coach whose sideline histrionics are shown frequently during games.

"The year Bobby Knight threw the chair, we had two incidents of chairs being thrown during the summer leagues," Mr. Marshaus says, referring to a famous 1985 game involving Indiana University's tempestuous basketball coach.

Mr. Marshaus also decries what he calls two "myths" of officiating that announcers often mention: that officials can be "worked" by coaches (verbally harassed to the point that they will make calls in the coach's favor) and that officials make "makeup" calls (making up for a bad or missed call by consciously making a bad call the other way to even things).

Good officials, Mr. Marshaus says, won't be affected by either, and the notion that they are fuels much of the obnoxious behavior exhibited by coaches, fans and parents.

"I think a lot of coaches see things on TV, and they go out and try to practice it," he says.

But as Mr. Gordon of Montgomery Soccer Inc. says, "It's not that [coaches] don't know how to control themselves, it's that they don't understand the role and process of coaching sometimes. Nobody taught them. That's another thing we're working on, to improve the training for coaches and give coaches the training and guidance they need so that they will learn how to run practices and teams."
