

Mitch Alexander's SOFTBALL ACADEMY Sportsmanship

Fastpitch softball is a sport. That means players and coaches need to play with and exhibit something called sportsmanship. While sportsmanship might be somewhat difficult to completely define, it's easy to spot when someone that should have it – doesn't. The player that calls her opponent names. The parent who berates the umpire. The coach who wants to win at all costs – regardless of how the other team feels so long as his team wins. Lately, unsportsmanlike conduct seems to be on the rise and has become the norm instead of the exception. Therefore, it's important for the rest of us to know how to understand, identify, and try to avoid unsportsmanlike conduct.

Recently, my 12u travel team was in a few local tournaments. I'm sad to say that more than one coach exhibited unsportsmanlike conduct, as did the players, and the players' parents. You see, if the coach (who is the team's

leader) normally uses this behavior, the players and their parents also tend to do so. That isn't to say that everyone on the team had bad manners. Some may not realize the situation, or recognize that unsportsmanlike conduct is the norm on their team. Game after game, the coach "protects" his team by making sure that the umpire's calls are in his team's favor. When this team comes across an umpire that won't bend to the coach's will, the umpire becomes the enemy and the team parents and even the players start yelling out things about the umpire.

Many games at the youth level are officiated by only one umpire. These umpires are the first to acknowledge that they can't see everything. Many of these coaches use what I like to call "influential unsportsmanlike conduct," which is when the other coach or team parents make the calls. They loudly let the umpire know when their player is safe and your player is out, and your player is always out if the play is close. Sometimes,

umpires make the calls they can't see by popular vote – whoever is loudest must have seen the play!

The game of softball is a game of honor. Rules are set out and well known before the game was even scheduled. Ground rules are established before the first pitch is thrown. However, some coaches think they can bend or even break the rules for their own benefit, sometimes to hide a coaching mistake they made! Coaches do not honor the game when they don't honor the umpire, the opposing coach, or the opposing team. We had the occasion to ask Sue Enquist about competition and how she views her opponents. She said they are a bunch of shirts that are required to play the game. They are treated with respect as players and coaches. She said that each player on her team needs to compete against themselves and not view the other team as something bad. This is a great concept. Your opponent is playing to win the game just as you are. The players are (or should be) honorable. The coaches are (or should be) honorable. The game is to be honored. The other team is necessary so you can play the game.

Our team and organization always try to honor the game. We don't argue with umpires. Our players don't make fun of the other team or coaches. We don't argue with the opposing team's coaches, players, or parents. Our base coaches never call the play safe or out. We know the rules of the organization we are playing under. We know the local rules. If there are any doubts, we discuss them with the umpire to make sure we understand before play starts. When our girls cheer, they do it to support their teammates, not to be obnoxious to the other team. Even though certain organizations and umpires allow cheering through the pitcher's windup, we don't support that.

When we do come across teams and coaches exhibiting unsportsmanlike conduct, we never address it directly with the players, coaches, or parents. That's not how this works. We address it with the umpire. Each manager is responsible for themselves, their players, and their players' parents. Instead of getting into it with the other manager, we go straight to the umpire. We treat the situation like a court of law and try to minimize direct communication with the other team. After all they are only a bunch of shirts

necessary to play the game. We shake hands and wish the other coaches and team captains good luck before the game, and shake hands and say “good game” afterwards. Any issues that come up during the game go through the umpire. They are the judge and jury of the softball field. Right or wrong, their decisions are usually final. They have the authority to stop unsportsmanlike conduct, you don’t – unless you decide to forfeit and leave the field.

Parents on the sidelines need to remember that it’s just a game and while there may be some championship or pool seeding resting on the outcome, the bottom line is that your child’s life will most likely not be significantly affected if they lose the game. Don’t shout at the other team or the umpire for a bad call. Good sportsmanship includes gracefully handling bad calls. Players should stay positive and acknowledge

that the players on the other team have the same interests they do and may one day be their teammates instead of their opponents. At the end of the game, shake hands or high five every player and coach on the other team. Don’t try to hurt the other players’ hands by punching, slapping, or bending the fingers back (as has happened to us on more than one occasion). Umpires should remember that they too, are not always right and not show favoritism to one team over the other. There is nothing more discouraging to a young pitcher than to see her strike zone squeezed down to the size of a volleyball just because she’s the better pitcher or her team is winning. Coaches should not knowingly break any rules. Good sportsmanship is required of EVERY person involved in a game, from the players and coaches, to the umpires, and spectators.

Mitch Alexander is the CIO for a major electronics company and coaches both Little League and Travel softball teams and is currently completing his PhD. He is a certified SUNY, ASA, and Double Goal Coach. His wife, Marie was one of the first female student athletes in the country to play Little League softball after Title IX was passed and played in the first Little League Softball World Series. Over the years, both have managed teams together and helped spark a love for softball in their student athletes. In his spare time, Mitch designs websites for fastpitch teams and businesses and can be reached at mitchalexander@optonline.net.

