



SOFTBALL ACADEMY

with Mitch Alexander

Ethics in Youth Sports

Who cares about ethics in sports anymore? Ethical issues involving pro sports players is nothing new although there have been quite a few featured in the news recently. Most baseball fans know about or remember when Pete Rose was banned from baseball for gambling on games he either played in or managed. Now we have domestic abuse issues, players taking performance enhancing drugs, and many other incidents. We've even had issues of colleges violating NCAA recruiting rules. Where does it end? Why does this matter?

I have heard about and witnessed many unethical issues in my tenure as a Fastpitch coach. Some we were able to address, others unfortunately we could not. I could write a book about the craziness I have witnessed all in the name of winning a softball game or season. I witnessed more unethical nonsense at the recreation level than at the travel level, but don't kid yourself it's there too. Here's an actual incident from this past fall season – this happened just a few weeks ago on my 14u select/travel team.... See if you can identify all of the unethical issues.

Our team had a weekend with no tournaments to play. I sent emails



and hit the phones in search of available teams to set up two doubleheader scrimmages. One to be played on Saturday and one to be played on Sunday. I found two teams available to play. Our team hosted the Saturday scrimmage at our home field. My coaches and I got to the field early and put about an hour and a half into field prep. The local town crew had freshly cut the grass and dragged the infield. We removed some new rocks that always seem to materialize out of nowhere. We raked out a few spots, measured out the bases, painted the foul lines and pitcher's circle. I regularly set-up a GoPro 2 miniature video camera on the outside of the back-stop at the games we play and did so for this scrimmage as well.

Both teams arrived and began their warmups. The umpire showed up a few minutes to game time. A week earlier, I called the local assignor and requested an umpire for a softball doubleheader – I did not know who was coming. The umpire put on his gear and walked to the field. Right away I knew something was not right. The umpire was the third base coach and ex-manager of the team we were to scrimmage on Sunday! We never scrimmaged the Saturday team before and we didn't know what to expect, especially since we were told that many girls from other teams recently joined this team.

During the game, my daughter parked a ball over the fence in deep right center. She jogged around the bases while her teammates came out of the dugout to cheer her on. One of our player's parents was in right field with a giant telephoto lens and took pictures for our team website. The GoPro recorded the entire game in high definition 1080p video with stereo audio. All seemed great for our team. It was a three run homer. My daughter and the rest



of the team went into the dugout while the next batter waited near the batter's box. Something seemed strange since the umpire did not start the game right away. Most umpires usually like to keep the game moving so they can get on to the next game or a relaxing weekend afternoon. A minute or so later the opposing coach ran out to the circle and another minute or two later the umpire announced the runner was out.

We like to teach good sportsmanship on our team and set an example for our players. It didn't matter that it was my daughter who was called out. I calmly approached the umpire and asked him why he made the call. He said my daughter never touched third base and was showboating by jogging around the bases and that



Photos by Frank McKee



she was two feet away from the bag. We knew this to be an impossibility since we were all watching her run the bases. However, I accepted his decision and returned to my coaching post. We were up by several runs at this point even with this bad call. The parent in the outfield rushed to our bleachers and had a picture clearly showing my daughter's foot hitting the corner of the third base bag. The umpire put two fingers up on one hand and said Scout's Honor, she missed the bag by 4 feet. In a conversation, later in the game, the 4 feet became 6 feet.

We ended up winning both games of the doubleheader that Saturday despite the umpire's shenanigans. The girls played well and had fun playing too. After the games were over, the ice cream man drove into the parking lot and players and parents enjoyed a frozen treat on a muggy, hot August day. We cleaned up the dugouts, collected our gear and packed up the SUV with our shade tent, gear, and kids. Almost everyone left but the umpire and my number two pitcher's family. We started to drive towards the exit and saw the umpire and the pitcher's parent having an in depth conversation. We were about to say our goodbyes when the pitcher's parent suddenly left. Our number two pitcher threw in the second game and pitched an amazing game. She threw hard, hit her spots, and I was pleased with the way she threw what I signaled for her to throw. In fact, it was the best game she threw to date.

We went on our way thinking it was a great day of softball. Many great defensive plays were made and our offense was on fire playing long ball, the short game, and something new we were working on – slashing. Later that evening, I downloaded the GoPro and was interested to see the call at third base and the delay in getting



the game moving afterwards. What I saw was shocking - the umpire signaled the opposing manager and told him to go speak with his team and apparently indicated the runner didn't touch the bag. Umpires have lots of responsibilities. However, initiating calls for not touching a base isn't one of them. Playing favorites is also not on the list. Enforcing proper play and the rules however is.

I sent the picture to the umpire for his own quality control, who apologized for his bad call. With the Saturday scrimmage behind us, I moved on to prepare for the doubleheader on Sunday. This time we played right on the water on the south shore of Long Island between two creeks that feed into a large bay that connects with the Atlantic Ocean. It was incredibly hot and humid. Everything started OK. About half way through the game, the air became thick with flying field ants. We completed the game and decided to forgo the second game. The girls on both teams were good sports about the swarming bugs but they were grateful to get out of there. It looked like something out of an old movie with one of the biblical plagues descending on us. Perhaps it was some type of foreshadowing. We later found out the swarming is a one day mating event that happens in the fall every 2 to 3 years.

A week went by and I received an email from the parent of our number two pitcher – I was told that effective immediately she was leaving the team. No explanation was given. Another week went by and we were at a multi-field park at a tournament. Wouldn't you know it – my ex-number two pitcher showed up in a uniform on the Saturday umpire's team! Since my team only had three pitchers, this roster change was not easy to cope with. It impacted the rest of the fall season and all the girls on the team.



Hanson and Savage from Santa Clara University's Markkula Center for Applied Ethics have written several papers and web pages about the role of ethics in sports. They suggest that the first step in understanding ethical behavior in sports is to understand that there is a distinction between gamesmanship and sportsmanship. Gamesmanship is concerned with winning and only winning.

Anything you can do to have a competitive advantage falls under gamesmanship. Winning is the most important factor. Someone is considered to have cheated only if they got caught doing so. The following are included under gamesmanship: faking an injury, tampering with equipment, interfering with a player if or when the umpire can't see the infraction, using performance enhancing drugs, injuring an opponent to get an advantage, or taunting the other team.

Sportsmanship is based on ethical behavior. It requires "four key values: fairness, integrity, responsibility and respect." Under fairness, teams must follow the established rules, players are not discriminated against, and referees must apply the rules in the same way to both teams. Integrity includes the concept of not trying to gain an unfair advantage over your opponent, faking injuries, or trying to get the umpire to make bad calls against your opponent. Responsibility means that players must take responsibility for their performance, emotions, and actions, coaches and players must understand the rules of play, and both must conduct themselves in an honorable fashion on and off the field. Respect covers the way that the coaches and players treat themselves, their opponents, the officials, and their coaches.





At the end of the day, it's all about doing the right thing, setting a good example for our scholar athletes, encouraging good character, and having sports influence our children in a positive way. This doesn't mean that players and teams shouldn't play hard or win their games. It does mean that they shouldn't win at all costs, the most valuable cost being their morality and ethics. Our coaches need to set an example for our players. Often our players learn life lessons and imitate the behavior they see on the softball field. There are important lessons to be learned and it's up to our coaches to make sure they are teaching the right ones. The focus needs to be on sportsmanship not on gamesmanship.



In our weekend of scrimmages, the Saturday umpire should not have accepted the assignment as it put him in an odd position: our umpire one day who can take notes about how our pitchers throw, how our players hit, etc. and then to be our opponent on the next day. It's a clear conflict of interest. It's a type of gamesmanship. He may have really thought that my daughter did not touch the bag rounding third, but since his motives are now questionable, it's also possible that he decided to rob her of her homerun to help the other team who is also one of his scrimmage partners. When the umpire alerted the other team's coach about the possible base issue that was an unacceptable bias of gamesmanship. Finally, scouting my number two pitcher and convincing her parent to switch teams mid-season at the end of our Saturday game is inexcusable and another example of gamesmanship.

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 fastpitch2001@optonline.net.

