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**“Being a Good Sport”: An Investigation of Sportsmanship Messages Provided by Youth
Soccer Parents, Officials, and Coaches**

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Abstract

This study involved a content analysis of sportsmanship messages that a sample of coaches, parents, and officials associated with youth athletics provided. Data were collected via highly structured interviews conducted before, after, and during youth soccer games. Results indicated that 9 different types of sportsmanship messages were provided to varying degrees and that the most prevalent types of messages offered were those that concerned enjoyment of the sport, respect and concern for opponents, and respect and concern for team/teammates.

Collective action is at the core of organized societies and competition is a focal point of capitalism. Youth athletics is an arena whereby children and adolescents are socialized about how collective action and competition concurrently occur in order to reach social goals (Bredemeier, 1994), a place where Horrocks (1980, p. 212) suggested “the joy of success and the disappointment of failure are often mutually realized.” Within the athletic context the nexus of these socializing forces emerges in talk about sportsmanship.¹

Everyday children and adolescents engage in athletic endeavors at varying levels of competition. An underlying premise of such activity is that athletes enact sportsmanship-like behavior within the athletic context. People involved with athletics as officials, coaches, athletes, or spectators would agree that sportsmanship is a fundamental and necessary component of athletic competition. However, there could be and likely is considerable variation in what sport participants believe constitutes sportsmanship.

Researchers have demonstrated that sportsmanship relates to the development of moral reasoning and social skills related to conflict resolution, leadership, and group interaction (Bredemeier, 1994; Horrocks, 1980; Sharpe, Brown, & Crider, 1995). In addition, educational scholars have argued for the benefits of integrating sportsmanship concepts into educational curricula and have warned against allowing a win-at-all-costs orientation to govern youth athletics (Horrocks, 1980; Spencer, 1996; Vail, 1997). These findings and suggestions illuminate the importance of sportsmanship as a valuable construct not only within the athletic context, but also within the broader social context.

The concept of sportsmanship is tied intimately to communication (Horrocks, 1980; Vallerand, Deshailes, Cuerrier, Briere, & Pelletier, 1996; Vallerand, Deshailes, & Cuerrier, 1997). Horrocks (1980) suggested that physical educators who encourage children to share and take turns during play and that coaches who remind players to treat visiting team members with courtesy and respect foster and facilitate sportsmanship. This fostering of sportsmanship is inherently communicative, enacted through the communicative acts of encouraging and reminding. Conversely, Vail (1997) noted that coaches resort to unsportsmanlike tactics when coaches encourage athletes to play hurt, verbally abuse and humiliate players, and defend or protect team members who cheat. Kassing and Infante (1999) found that coaches’ communication related to athletes’ self-reported tendencies to enact sportsmanship behaviors. Clearly communication plays a critical role in shaping understandings of sportsmanship behavior.

Researchers have noted a lack of consistency concerning conceptualizations of sportsmanship, but have recognized the pervasive and fundamental role that social contexts plays in sportsmanship behavior (Vallerand et. al, 1996, 1997). Vallerand et al. (1996) suggested that sportsmanship definitions included ideas related to general attitudes toward sport, ethical norms within athletic contexts, positive social interaction related to game play, and moral reasoning in light of constraints related to success. However, they also pointed out that amid this variability

¹ Although the authors intend to use the term sportsmanship in a gender-neutral fashion, we recognize that some readers may perceive the term sportsmanship to be gendered. However, we do not feel a suitable alternative exists in popular vernacular that captures the nature of the construct well (e.g., sportpersonship, unsporting conduct).

children develop consensual agreement regarding the nature of sportsmanship through repeated interaction in athletic contexts with coaches, officials, parents, other adults, and peers (Vallerand et al., 1996).

Thus, there is evidence to suggest that variability and consensus exist with regard to how people conceive of and understand sportsmanship. To better understand the variable ideas that come to constitute consensual understanding of sportsmanship for youth athletes we posed the following research question:

RQ1: What types of sportsmanship messages are provided to youth soccer players?

Coaches are frequently identified as role models for youth athletes (Horrocks, 1980; Spencer, 1996; Vail, 1997; Wolff, 1993), as are parents and spectators (Wolff, 1993). In addition, officials serve as adult participants that also influence the enactment of sportsmanship in athletic competitions. Thus, sportsmanship messages generated by coaches, parents, and officials associated with youth sports were the focus of the current research².

The media have portrayed soccer as less of an American sport than baseball, American football, basketball, and hockey (Delgado, 1997). However, the popularity of youth soccer is formidable and often recognized as the most popular organized youth sport. Many children have the opportunity to play soccer at young ages and to continue playing throughout adolescence at potentially increasing levels of competitiveness (i.e., on select teams). For these reasons and because this was an exploratory effort to decipher initial conceptions of sportsmanship soccer represented an ideal sport on which to focus.

Method

Participants

Seventy-two adults who resided in a large metropolitan area of the Southwest that were associated with youth soccer as coaches, officials, or parents participated in this study. The age of participants ranged from 18 to 49 ($M = 43.37$, $SD = 9.42$). Sixty-two percent of the respondents were male, whereas 38% were female. Fifty-six percent of the respondents identified themselves as parents, 26% as officials, and 18% as coaches.³ The number of years involved with youth athletics ranged from 1 to 35 ($M = 11.64$, $SD = 7.40$). Twenty-four percent of the participants reported that they were involved with boys' soccer, 19% with girls' soccer, and 57% with both.

Data Collection Procedure

Respondents participated in highly-structured interviews before, during, or after soccer games that they were attending. Respondents were provided with a cover letter that requested

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their participation in a brief interview about youth sports and that described the research purpose. The cover letter stated that the researchers were interested in learning about sportsmanship; however, sportsmanship was not defined for respondents. Investigators asked respondents to “provide three statements that they would communicate to youth athletes concerning sportsmanship”. Messages respondents provided were written down verbatim. Respondents were then asked a set of demographic questions about themselves and about the level and duration of their involvement with youth soccer.

Coding Procedure

Some participants provided more than the requested three statements, whereas others provided fewer. Furthermore, some participants provided messages that clearly were not related to sportsmanship (e.g., “there are no favorites among the team—should be judged on ability,” “you can’t say abusive things to children, must be positive, cannot be negative”). These messages were excluded from the analysis. In total, then, 264 messages were subjected to content analysis.

A coding scheme was created specifically for this project. Using content categories that were previously acknowledged in the literature (Vallerand et al., 1996) and information available in both youth and professional soccer association manuals a seven-category coding scheme was derived. The initial coding scheme for this project contained the following categories: (a) commitment to participate (reflected playing hard, playing well, and competing at the highest level of one’s ability); (b) enjoyment of the sport (involved having fun, enjoying the game, not focussing on winning or losing, and avoiding a win-at-all-costs attitude); (c) respect/concern for rules (referred to playing fair, playing by the rules, and refraining from cheating); (d) respect/concern for officials/coaches (referred to respecting official’s calls, deferring to authority, not arguing with officials or coaches); (e) respect/concern for opponents (referred to avoiding trash talk and intentional physical harm to opponents, treating opponents with respect and congratulating opponents); (f) respect/concern for team/teammates (referred to encouraging, supporting, respecting teammates, avoiding criticism of teammates); and (g) other (messages that did not fit clearly fit into one of the other categories).

Upon completion of the coding process reevaluation of the other category revealed three emergent categories. The emergent categories were: (a) role modeling (concerned choosing role models carefully); (b) composure (referred to maintaining composure and self-control); and (c) general directives (included general comments about how to approach athletic competition and how athletic competition related more broadly to life experience).

All messages were coded independently by two trained coders. Coders were provided with descriptions of the content categories in the initial coding scheme and were asked to code a portion of messages, which were not included in the research sample. This procedure served to familiarize coders with the coding scheme. The principal investigator answered coders’ questions and clarified content categories as necessary. Each coder then independently coded all messages contained in the sample. Percentage agreement between coders was .86. Coding differences were resolved through discussion until consensus was reached.

Results

The coding process revealed that nine types of messages were provided ($N = 264$). The greatest proportion of messages offered by respondents ($n = 62, 23.48\%$) concerned enjoyment of the sport. These messages referred to the idea of having fun, enjoying the game, not focussing on winning or losing, and avoiding a win-at-all-costs attitude. Examples included: “it’s a sport before it’s a contest, enjoy the game,” “winning isn’t everything—more important how you play,” “enjoyment should come first,” and “be happy win or lose.”

The next largest proportion of messages provided by respondents concerned respect and concern for opponents ($n = 45$, 17.04%) and respect/concern for team/teammates ($n = 43$, 16.29%). Respect and concern for opponents messages referred to avoiding trash talk and intentional physical harm to opponents, treating opponents with respect and congratulating opponents. Examples included: “don’t be obnoxious to the other team because they won,” “modesty, don’t rub it in when you win,” “always treat opponents as you would like to be treated,” “after the game congratulate the opponent,” and “trash talk should not be tolerated.” Respect/concern for team/teammates messages referred to encouraging, supporting and respecting teammates as well as avoiding criticism of teammates. Examples included: “learn to interact appropriately with other team members, combined group effort,” “always treat your teammates with respect,” “encourage your teammates to do better, to improve,” “encourage your teammates, don’t badmouth your teammates,” and “support each other, be encouraging of your teammates.”

Commitment to participate messages which referred to playing hard, playing well, and competing at the highest level of one’s ability accounted for 13.64% ($n = 36$) of the messages offered. Examples of commitment to participate messages included: “try your best,” “play hard,” “dedication and commitment, show up, work hard, do what it takes, give effort,” and “master the skills of the game and play the best you can.”

Twenty-eight messages (10.60%) were coded as respect and concern for rules messages. These messages captured ideas related to playing fair, playing by the rules, and refraining from cheating. Examples of respect/concern for the rules messages included: “play fair, play by the rules, avoid cheating,” “respect the integrity of the game,” “play a clean game,” and “stay within the rules.”

Of the original seven categories considered, the smallest proportion of messages provided by respondents were those messages that related to respect/concern for officials/coaches ($n = 17$, 6.44%). Respect/concern for officials/coaches messages referred to respecting official’s calls, deferring to authority, and not arguing with officials or coaches. Examples included: “listen to and follow the instructions of coaches,” “should not abuse or question referees,” “respect for the officials decision, won’t be changed once it is called,” and “officials do their best, respect officials.”

The remaining messages ($n = 33$, 12.51%) were originally coded as “other.” Further examination of this category revealed three additional message types: role modeling ($n = 4$, 1.52%), composure ($n = 9$, 3.41%), and general directives ($n = 20$, 7.58%). Role modeling messages referred to choosing sports role models carefully (e.g., “do not model parent’s inappropriate behavior,” “don’t use fans as a barometer of what sportsmanship should be, pick appropriate role models for sportsmanship”). Composure messages referred to maintaining composure and self-control (e.g., “make a wise choice in reacting to situations and controlling yourself because the consequences can be severe,” “keeping your cool, take negative energy and focus it in a positive way,” “maintain your composure”). Lastly, general directives messages referred to general comments about how to approach athletic competition and how athletics should relate more broadly to life experience (e.g., “learn to be a good sport as a youth, something to build on as an adult, life lessons,” “competition is a learning tool, use lessons later in life,” “set a positive example by your actions”).

Discussion

The multiplicity and variety of messages provided by respondents in this study support the contention that sportsmanship is a multidimensional construct that is socially constructed

(Vallerand et al., 1996). Results revealed that potentially nine different types of sportsmanship messages are being provided to youth athletes. These messages incorporate a collection of issues related to athletic participation that include: being well prepared to participate, maintaining one's composure, playing fairly, and respecting officials, coaches, opponents, and teammates reflecting previous conceptualizations of sportsmanship behavior (Vallerand et. al, 1996). In addition, messages also captured ideas not previously recognized as potential factors contributing to conceptualizations of sportsmanship. These related to enjoying oneself, choosing role models carefully, and learning about life through the activity of sport. These additional components of sportsmanship reflect respondents' efforts to provide wisdom about how to address the inherent tension between competition and cooperation that exists within athletic competitions (Bredemeier, 1994; Horrocks, 1980). It appears that parents, coaches, and officials attempt to do so by referencing the extra-athletic value of participation (i.e., the benefits derived from participation in general versus in a particular or specific competition).

An apparent paradox exists within the types of messages provided. Commitment to participate messages reflect a "play to win" orientation, whereas enjoyment of the sport messages reflect a "play to have fun" orientation. An ardent commitment to participate and excel, results in competitiveness, which is prized in a society that likes winners (Vail, 1997). Our societal focus on winning is strong and often profit-driven. In professional sports organizations winning translates to profits. In other businesses "team" and "winning" metaphors play a crucial role in organizational success. In this respect receipt of "playing to win" messages prepares youth athletes for challenges they will face later in life. However, many critics of youth athletics argue that too much pressure is placed upon youth athletes to win and call for a more balanced attitude that encourages a "play for the enjoyment of the sport" perspective (Vail, 1997; Wolff, 1993). Although playing to win and playing for fun may appear diametrically opposed, both messages were provided with regularity in this study suggesting that these perspectives can co-exist. The challenge is to create an environment where the process of working hard is as valued as the product of a specific achievement, winning. These ends need not be mutually exclusive.

The current study represents an initial attempt to decipher from a communication standpoint the multidimensional nature of sportsmanship. The study was intended to be exploratory and to that end is limited in several ways. The current research is limited by a small and regional sample, as well as by the examination of a single team sport. Future research should consider if the multiplicity of sportsmanship messages revealed in this study is apparent when various other sports as well as individual (vs. team) sports are considered and when different levels of competition are considered. Additionally, it would be interesting to consider cultural conceptions of sportsmanship to determine if collective consensus about what constitutes sportsmanship is similar or different than what was revealed in the U.S. sample solicited for this research.

Sport brings diverse people together as participants and as spectators in an organized setting where societal values such as showing respect and dignity for others, recognizing and adhering to prescribed rules, and displaying deference to authority figures are portrayed. The current research demonstrates that communication is vital to the enactment of this endeavor.

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