
AN EXAMINATION OF SPORTSMANSHIP AND BEHAVIOR IN YOUTH SPORT: THE CASE OF LITTLE LEAGUE BASEBALL

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Synopsis:

A qualitative examination of player and stakeholder behavior related to established sportsmanship concepts in a competitive youth sport environment.

Abstract:

PURPOSE:

Researchers have examined many concepts relating to sportsmanship. However, the definition and even the value of sportsmanship vary among sports and organizations. Sport has long been both lauded and condemned for its role in personal and moral development. In the landmark essay *Sport and Sportsmanship*, Charles Kennedy, posits that sportsmanship is not simply a theoretical or scholarly concept, it is a moral imperative which should permeate both the field of play and all of life. Freezell (1986) builds upon the early work and states sportsmanship is a relevant course of study due to the prevalent place of sport in both American and International culture. Current studies examine sportsmanship at a variety of competitive levels including professional, collegiate, recreational, and youth. Attempts at defining sportsmanship most often list certain expected behaviors by the athletes, coaches, administrators, fans, and parents. A good sportsman possesses fundamental values based on respect, fairness, civility, honesty and responsibility. Previous investigations provide insight into the relationship among youth sport participation and behaviors; however, an understanding of sportsmanship in youth sport still needs clarification. The purpose of this investigation is to examine Little League baseball player, coach, and parent behaviors related to the established concepts of sportsmanship. This study provides an in-depth look at youth and adult actions, both good and bad, in a specific setting. This study is relevant for a variety of audiences as sport faces many issues related to values and sportsmanship worldwide. The relationship of learned behaviors to other issues within the sport field is also examined.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

Prior research has shown both the positive and negative role of sport participation in the development of young people. The majority of sport research supports the physical and psychological benefits of athletic participation. Leadership skills, self-discipline, respect, self-confidence, self-esteem, and the ability to cooperate, and psychological well-being are just some of the benefits of competition (Smoll, Cumming & Smith, 2011). According to others, competition and sportsmanship are inextricably linked. Poor sportsmanlike behaviors can include aggression, violence, cheating and willing at all costs attitudes. Actions of adults and youth alike are increasingly becoming an issue for sport and league administrators. In youth sport there are many stakeholders for which sportsmanship can be considered. Attempts to understand relationships between the youth sport leader, parents, spectators and the young athlete behaviors are common. Results suggest these stakeholders do have an impact on the behavior of young athletes. Research shows when parents, fans and coaches exhibited unsportsmanlike or sportsmanlike behavior young athletes also demonstrated these behaviors. Ryska (2009) proposed that an athlete's level of competitiveness, sport motivation, and perceived purpose of their sport participation all impacted sportsmanship behaviors.

METHODOLOGY:

This in-depth qualitative study examined behavior of coaches, parents, umpires, and players within a United States Little League baseball organization. The researchers interviewed randomly selected all-star players and observed coaches, parents and umpires participating in the 2014 baseball season. The research team stayed in the field from the beginning of the 2014 season in May through completion of the season in August. The team interviewed 10 players. The questions were semi-structured and open-ended, leading to a conversation type discussion with the athletes. According to Gill, Stewart, Treasure, and Chadwick (2008), interviews with young children produce unique, detailed and trustworthy accounts, improving understanding on a variety of issues. Both practice and games were observed. The direct observation has several advantages; the inquirer is better able to understand and capture the context, has less need to rely on prior conceptualizations, and may notice things that escape others. For trustworthiness, a reflexive journal was kept, member checks were performed and interviews were transcribed and reviewed.

RESULTS:

Analysis is ongoing. The interview data will be presented showing the emergent themes with detailed description and quotes for discussion. Observations were coded using a modified version of the Kidman and McKenzie's (1996) Parent Observation Instrument for Sport Events (POISE). Policy suggestions for sport administrators and organizations and the continued impact on behavior will be addressed. The implications of this work and future research considerations will also be provided. Early results are promising for academics and practitioners who emphasize the importance of

sportsmanship at the youth level and beyond.

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