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Sportsmanship

If you're into sports, you've seen it happen. You've probably even experienced it: Football players shaking hands after four quarters of knocking each other around. Tennis players leaping over the net to shake hands with their opponents after a hard-fought match. Soccer players exchanging jerseys after an intense 90 minutes. Even boxers touching gloves at the beginning of each round, then hugging each other after beating each other into a pulp for 12 rounds. It seems like competitors in every event, from spelling bees to hockey, behave this way. What's going on?

It's all part of sportsmanship, a great tradition in sports and competition that means playing clean and handling both victory and defeat with grace, style, and dignity.

What Is Sportsmanship?

Sportsmanship is defined as:

- * playing fair
- * following the rules of the game
- * respecting the judgment of referees and officials
- * treating opponents with respect

Some people define good sportsmanship as the "golden rule" of sports – in other words, treating the people you play with and against as you'd like to be treated yourself. You demonstrate good sportsmanship when you show respect for yourself, your teammates, and your opponents, for the coaches on both sides, and for the referees, judges, and other officials.

But sportsmanship isn't just reserved for the people on the field. Cheerleaders, fans, and parents also need to be aware of how they behave during competition. Sportsmanship is a style and an attitude, and it can have a positive influence on everyone around you.

Win or Lose, Sportsmanship Helps You Get Through

In the last few years, taunting, trash-talking, gloating, and cheap shots have become all too common in sports. You've probably seen athletes who take their

own successes too seriously, too. They celebrate a goal with a prolonged victory dance or constantly brag about their abilities. This is the exact opposite of what sportsmanship is all about. This kind of behavior might make you feel tough or intimidating to an opponent, but keep in mind it can also cause you to lose the match. Plenty of games have been lost to penalties gathered from "unsportsmanlike conduct."

Everyone feels great when they win, but it can be just as hard to be a good sport when you've won a game as when you've lost one. Good sportsmanship takes maturity and courage – when you work really hard at a sport, it's not easy to admit you made a bad play or that someone has more skills than you. In competition – as in life – you may not always win but you can learn something from losing, too.

It's pretty tough to lose, so it definitely doesn't help matters if someone continues taunting you or your team after the competition is over. Sometimes it's hard to swallow your pride and walk on. But there's always the next match. When you do lose – and it will happen – don't take it out on your opponent, blame the officials, or blame your team. Take it in stride. When you lose, lose with class. Being proud of how you performed, or at least being aware of things you need to improve for next time, is key. When it comes to losing, good sportsmanship means congratulating the winners promptly and willingly. Also, it means accepting the game's outcome without complaint and without excuses, even if you sometimes might suspect the referees made some questionable calls.

When you win, the trick is to be a gracious and generous winner. Good sportsmanship means acknowledging victories without humiliating opponents, being quietly proud of success, and letting victories speak for themselves. Even if you win by a landslide, good sportsmanship means still finding ways to compliment your opponents.

Practicing Good Sportsmanship

So what does it take to demonstrate good sportsmanship in real-life situations? Here are some examples of things you can do:

- * Learn as much as you can about your sport. Play by its rules. Show up for practice, work hard, and

realize that on a team, everyone deserves a chance to play.

- * Talk politely and act courteously toward everyone before, during, and after games and events. That includes your teammates, your opponents, your coaches and their coaches, the officials presiding over the game, and even spectators (who can sometimes be loud about their opinions).

- * Stay cool. Even if others are losing their tempers, it doesn't mean you have to. Remind yourself that no matter how hard you've practiced and played, it is, after all, just a game.

- * Avoid settling disputes with violence. If you're in a difficult situation or someone's threatening you, seek help immediately from your coach or from an official. Remember, too, that if you respond with violence you could get penalized, which could hurt your chances of winning.

- * Cheer your teammates on with positive statements – and avoid trash-talking the other team.

- * Acknowledge and applaud good plays, even when someone on the other team makes them.

- * When officials make a call, accept it gracefully even if it goes against you. Remember that referees may not be right every time – but they're people who are doing their best, just as you are.

- * Whether you win or lose, congratulate your opponents on a game well played.

Fair and Fun

Good sportsmanship means not having a "win at any cost" attitude. Most athletes who don't have a "win at any cost" attitude are more likely to talk about how much they love their sport and how much personal satisfaction and enjoyment they get from participation.

Most people won't go on to play professional sports, and only a few will win scholarships to play at college. But many forget to have a good time during the years they do play because they're so focused on winning. And, unfortunately, parents and coaches sometimes put too much pressure on athletes, emphasizing winning at all costs. So although it's great to be a champion, it's even better to have enjoyed the process of trying to reach the top. It's best to play fair while having fun.

Sportsmanship Off the Field

Learning good sportsmanship means finding that the positive attitude learned on the field carries over into other areas of life. At school, for example, you're able to appreciate the contributions made by classmates and know how to work as part of a team to complete a project. You may enjoy more success at work as well, because a big part of learning good sportsmanship is learning to be respectful of others, including customers and coworkers.

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