

Reaction Paper 3: Sportsmanship

From a fan's perspective, sportsmanship affects how we interact and engage with the games that we follow on a regular basis. Unfortunately, the immature, often illegal, sometimes vulgar, sometimes crude behavior by fans and athletes alike overshadows the good – passion, hard work, determination and teamwork. We live in an imperfect world in which people do very imperfect things. But let's not forget the good. Let's not forget about why sports were sports in the first place: to be fun.

In collegiate athletics in particular, much media attention is given to fan behavior. In a recent article in *Sports Illustrated* titled "Over the Top," fan behavior is specifically highlighted in terms of Division I college basketball. To receive telephone calls over a week stretch preceding his team's Oregon road trip, All-American forward/center Kevin Love handled the situation like a mature young man. But it begs the question: Do sports breed delusion? To seek a telephone number for the sole purpose of antagonizing the recipient, and to make death threats to not only Love but to his family speaks to delusion, and definitely not to "fun."

For our purposes, let's look at college basketball at the highest level (although sportsmanship is certainly a valid discussion at any level of any sport). The top high school basketball players now must attend college for a single year before becoming NBA Draft eligible, instead of being able to make the immediate leap. As a result, in Love's case, and his father has stated explicitly, if it weren't for this rule, Love would have been in the draft (and most likely a lottery pick, out of high school). It remains a question as to "when" rather than "if" Love would leave school early (at the time of this paper, there have been several conflicting reports about Love's draft status, yet an official report has yet to be released).

At this point, he is a glorified celebrity on UCLA's campus in Westwood, yet must attend class. He must do the things that students do. He must remain eligible. However, the image remains that these athletes are professionals in training – and definitely not amateurs – and this is the basis for such widespread vulgarity and boorish behavior. These guys have feelings, emotions, wants, desires, yet people refuse to admit this – especially those with signs that say "F--- Kevin Love."

I think there's proof for this. How many cases of poor sportsmanship do we see at the Division III level? While one can argue that our media only reports big-time collegiate athletics, we are in the middle of Division III athletics here at St. Olaf. There just isn't a comparison to Grant Wahl's discussion in *SI*. If sportsmanship is a crucial concern outlined by the NCAA, why not make these athletes less glorified? This begins with the media. CBS is in the midst of an 11-year, \$6 billion dollar contract for broadcast rights to the Final Four (<http://www.sportsbusinessradio.com/>). The coverage is constant to the point that you just can't say that "Memphis' backcourt is pretty good" in any other way. *Practices* are televised. And now, ESPN's version of the media and being a journalist is interviewing other ESPN analysts, whom they deem experts, simply because there is too much airtime. These athletes are constantly on display, in the limelight. These delusional folks forget that a game is more than a game but less than life and death because our society is built upon our images in the media. Quite frankly, there are quite a few of these images of professional – err amateur – athletes on our televisions and computers.

Much of the discussion surrounding sportsmanship is in terms of what individual institutions can do to curb fan behavior. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* published an article titled "Crying Foul Over Foul Behavior" which discussed a college's potential responsibility to control behavior but at the same time many said that students themselves must be willing to represent change.

Other attention has been diverted to how adults are role models for youth in terms of what is appropriate sportsmanship. The Polk County, Fla. newspaper *The Ledger* recently published an article indicating that high school coaches who are ejected from a game or match in which they are a participant as a coach must pass a class online before being reinstated by the Florida State High School Athletic Association Board. Both of these examples, whether it be a collegiate body imposing its will on boorish students or a high school board examining sportsmanship and ramifications on players, involve institutions trying very hard to circumvent an issue that in the long run, will continue to be a pressing concern unless long-term considerations are taken into consideration.

Although an institution may need to step in during some situations, if sportsmanship is an issue on the NCAA's list, then President Myles Brand must think bigger picture ... much bigger, to the point that the way our society is moving, it may be nearly impossible. Brand must begin with the restructuring of the National Basketball Association's relationship with Division I men's basketball. No longer can a college team be a liaison for a single season, or part thereof, to the NBA Draft. NBA Commissioner David Stern will have to be in the picture. If a high school athlete wants to be NBA draft eligible, then that's fine – if he's willing to take the NBA's minimum salary. If he goes to school for one year, he's eligible for a salary slightly better than the NBA's minimum, and so on. For a player that graduates from college, he is eligible for the best first-year NBA salary. These salaries are only for the first year in the league. A player's first year in the League will generally be less superior to that of another year of college, so the incentive will be there to continually improve, get a degree, while obtaining the maximum salary. For those that truly say that "it's not about money" and for those that are indeed the most talented, then they can leave at any time they want. Furthermore, this ensures that players prove themselves in the NBA before awarded an undeserved contract. What does this have to do with sportsmanship? It erases the perception that these players are about money and money only.

Once Brand (or his predecessor, as this would be a timely process) does the above, an extensive public relationship campaign must take place. Academic records must be made available to the public, signifying that students do indeed attend class, and are indeed on track for a degree.

Last, something has to occur within our sports media industry. It's hard to suggest that our journalists or networks should report less, because that would massively contradict how the industry has progressed. But these people have lives, emotions, feelings and families. They make mistakes, as do you or I. Our media should look outside the box and report our athletes as people who happen to be very good at what they do.

Our games are exciting and full of intrinsic good. The media certainly plays a negative role in the sports discussion, but they also make sport possible and fun. CBS'

coverage of the NCAA tournament is generally very polished and the folks at the network seem to be aware of “fun,” especially during the creation of their annual “One Shining Moment” video. The cries, the incredible, improbable shots, the cheers, the positives – these go forgotten in the midst of negative sports coverage. We navigate to espn.com and we reports of someone missing practice, a player charged with a third DUI, a fight at a nightclub or in some cases, fan behavior gone bad. When is it reported that the coach was gracious in defeat, even in the championship, or that the player went out of his way to curb his own fans’ behavior? Hardly ever.

Works Cited

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