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How Responsible Coaches and Responsible Sport Parents Handle Taunting

Taunting and trash-talking seems to be par for the course now in professional sports. And sadly our kids are taking note, and emulating this behavior on the court, field, mat, ice and in the pool. Some adults and youth sports organizations have even condoned the behavior, saying that a “little fun, good-natured ribbing” is just a part of sports. But is it? **“How should we handle trash-talking and taunting when we see it happen in youth sports?”**

“Trash-talking is part of sports. Competition would simply not be as much fun without good-natured ribbing and teasing,” say some youth sports leaders. But is that really the case? The experts at Positive Coaching Alliance don’t think so – and we’re inclined to agree: trash-talking simply isn’t a part of good sportsmanship, at any level.

Players engage in taunting and trash-talk as a way to affect their opponent’s focus, composure and emotional control. They are looking to elicit reactions including frustration, aggression, retaliation and miscues all designed to gain a competitive advantage. Simply put: when players feel like they can’t win the game with their performance alone, they turn to taunting tactics to distract their opponent from delivering their best performance. And as Responsible Coaches and Responsible Sport Parents know, it’s really tough for athletes to keep their cool in the face of such behavior and sadly it does throw our athletes for a loop, creating missteps, unnecessary fouls and penalties, and in some cases, outright ejection.

We’re reminded that we can only “control the controllables” and that our opponents’ bad behavior and bad sportsmanship is out of our control, but we can control our response to this behavior, rising above and eliminating the impact that this taunting has on us as coaches or parents or the effect it has on our athletes.

1. Acknowledge It & Talk About It

Don’t pretend it doesn’t exist or think your athletes already know how you think or feel about it. Responsible Coaches acknowledge that taunting exists and talk to their players at the beginning of the season about it. They talk about why opponents engage in it, highlighting that opponents normally turn to trash-talking when (a) they are losing the performance battle and (b) they believe it can affect you. As a coach, empathize with your players about how hard it is to prevent trash-talking from affecting you. Use video examples of professional players who lost their cool in the face of taunting and how that negatively impacted their team and the outcome of the game.

2. Create a Zero-Tolerance Policy

In the first team meeting, Responsible Coaches should explain team rules and include a zero-tolerance policy for taunting and trash-talking as well as a zero-tolerance policy for retaliation. Clearly outline the penalties for violating the rules. And explain why the rules are important to you as the coach and why they are important for the success of the team. As with any rules, if they are violated, Responsible Coaches need to follow-through with penalties, even when it means benching star players and risking a loss in the game.





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3. Create Refocusing Strategies

As a team, identify the triggers in a game that might cause one of your athletes to want to trash-talk or lash out at opponents. As a team, create a refocusing strategy that players can use independently or with their teammates to help refocus when taunting and trash-talking starts. Have athletes huddle up and use a catch phrase like “We’re Good” or “Play Our Game” to help athletes refocus on the play at hand and not on the taunting. Ask captains to play a strong role in ensuring that teammates don’t trash-talk even if opponents do.

4. Recognize Good Sportsmanship

If you believe that good sportsmanship is important, your actions should mirror your words. Your team rules may dictate punishment if someone engages in taunting and trash-talk, but your team culture should celebrate the ability to refocus and show good sportsmanship in the face of opponents’ taunting. Here’s a fun idea: buy a set of great headphones in team colors or put your team logo in the side of the headphones and create a weekly award for “No Noise” – the player who was best able to ignore the taunting from the other side and stay focused on the task at hand. It’s a symbolic reward for players who practice what you’re preaching. And they get a week of listening to their favorite music through a fantastic set of headphones!



Since 1981, BGYSA has been providing the opportunity for area youth to enjoy the spirit of teamwork and camaraderie while learning the skills of recreational soccer. The player will often progress into more competitive teams and become prepared for middle and high school levels of play.

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