

# Little League Fistfight to Recreation Rage: When Does it Stop?

By John Gallucci Jr., MS, ATC, SPT, and Charlie Shoulberg, MS

Over the past several years, the climate of sporting events has changed. So much, in fact, that a Saturday afternoon ball game with the family now easily can turn into a brawl started by two parents arguing over the way a child pitches. In many cases, the police will wind up escorting one or both parents to the police station.

On January 26, 2002, the *Associated Press* reported that Thomas Junta was sentenced to 6-10 years in prison for involuntary manslaughter due to a fatal incident that claimed the life of Michael Costin at their children's pick-up game.

The unfortunate reality, according to Michigan State University's Institute for the Study of Youth Sports, is that 70 percent of children drop out of organized sports by age 13. The Minnesota Amateur Sports Commission reports that 45.3 percent of participants have been called names, yelled at or insulted while participating in sports, 17.5 percent say they have been hit, kicked or slapped while participating in sports, 21 percent say they were forced to play with an injury and 8.2 percent say they were pressured to intentionally harm others while playing sports.

Despite heightened awareness of youth sports violence, the number of abusive, negative and violent incidents has risen sharply in the last five years among all age groups and all sports.

What can certified athletic trainers do? We can get involved.

Athletic trainers need to help change the culture of thinking in parents and coaches. In many cases athletic trainers are the only medical professionals at a sporting event, and they are closely observing the activity to help prevent and treat injuries. Athletic trainers can see what's going on, and many have probably witnessed talented young athletes abandoning once-loved sports as the pressure to perform becomes too intense, too emotionally charged or, sometimes, too dangerous.



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To reverse this disturbing trend, the Saint Barnabas Health Care System has developed a program for recreational and youth leagues called Rediscovering Youth Sportsmanship.

The Rediscovering Youth Sportsmanship Program is an innovative, proactive approach to fostering a positive environment at youth sporting events. Designed by sports medicine and behavioral health experts from the Saint Barnabas Health Care System, Rediscovering Youth Sportsmanship is a highly credible, effective and comprehensive certification program that educates administrators, coaches, parents and, ultimately, the youth athlete in the following:

- Effective communication;
- Anger management and conflict resolution;
- Realistic developmental expectation;
- Self-esteem and values.

The program includes a thorough training session that defines the problem of poor sportsmanship, its consequences and the importance of positive role modeling.

Education modules are presented to teach attendees about the developmental expectations of young athletes, how to deal with and manage anger, how to oversee conflict resolution and how to encourage self-esteem and values among the players.

Administrators, coaches and parents receive certification in sportsmanship training from the Saint Barnabas Health Care System/The Rediscovering Youth Sportsmanship Program.

Upon completion of the program, administrators, coaches, parents and youth athletes are given cards to sign and carry with them agreeing to abide by the Saint Barnabas Code of Conduct rules for sportsmanship.

The program strongly recommends sanctions or consequences for poor parental behavior, and program instructors work closely with each team to develop sanctions that fit within their specific rules and guidelines.

The sanctions range from immediate ejection and probation for the remainder of the season for the first infraction involving verbal abuse to suspension of the offending adult for the remainder of the season.

The program also recommends that prior to reinstatement the following year, the parent should attend some form of anger management instruction.

In some severe cases of parental mis-

behavior, suspending a child can be effective – because parents are apt to think twice before continuing behavior that may affect their child’s opportunity to play. It’s simple human nature to pay more attention to rules that carry a penalty, especially in the beginning of changing a cultural norm.

The Rediscovering Youth Sportsmanship program has been adopted by many national and state youth sports organizations, including the New Jersey Youth Hockey League, New Jersey Youth Soccer Association, Atlantic Amateur Hockey Association, Mid-American Youth Hockey League, New Jersey State Interscholastic Athletic Association, USA Hockey Atlantic Division, USA Hockey Pacific Division, USA Hockey Congress, Atlantic Youth Hockey League, Delaware Valley Hockey Association, Missouri Amateur Hockey Association, Youth Division, Northern

New Jersey Maternal and Child Health Consortium, Yogi Berra Museum and Learning Center and Seton Hall University.

Most recently, the program has been presented at the conference of the National Association for Health and Fitness, “The Network of State and Governor’s Councils” and endorsed by the President’s Challenge on Physical Fitness and Health. ■■

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