

Keeping Perspective and Controlling Emotions in High Pressure Contests

Written by Larry Lauer, Ph D

Director of Coaching Education and Development Institute for the Study of Youth Sports
Michigan State University

High school sport is very exciting and a favorite pastime of many adults in this country. People are fanatical about their high school team. Then, when the big game arrives whole communities go to watch and cheer on their local heroes. The state playoffs sure feel like college or professional sports! The stakes are huge!

Step back and think about this for a moment. Often we treat 15, 16, 17 year olds like local celebrities. Our community's pride lies in the balance with children who you are two to three times older! It is amazing when you think about. In reality, high school sport is neither professional nor collegiate sport and is still, as Jack Roberts of the MHSAA says, occurring in the classroom. It's just that the classroom is now a gym, field or rink.

Would a parent go absolutely bonkers in the classroom? Probably not. Would they swear at the teacher because she made a bad decision on how to address English, math, or writing? No, I don't think so. So, why in sport does it happen? Where do parents find the courage to do things they would never do any where else (we hope)? Because sport is so popular, so meaningful, the rewards seemingly so powerful and the evaluation so public, parents take great pride in their children's athletic success. And, sometimes they take great shame when their children fail.

How did we get to the point where coaches and administrators often say parents are the biggest issue in interscholastic athletics? Certainly a societal trend in treating the lives of youth as a series of planned experiences to hone their skills and open their opportunities for success (i.e., scholarships) as an adult contributes to the importance placed on high school sport. At the same time, it seems that the professional model of sport has trickled down right through the Olympics and elite amateur sport and college athletics to high school sport. Winning and development of talent for the glory of scholarships and increased opportunities epitomize a professionalization of sport. If the mindset is "win at all costs", "athlete before student", and "performance before well-being" then the sport is professionalized. How else could we legitimize traveling to another state to play teams not in our conference during a school week?

With this backdrop we can understand why many parents take sport so seriously despite the estimated results showing that less than 6% of high school athletes compete at the NCAA level, and many of those do not receive a full-ride scholarship. If your child's success is tied to your self-esteem as a parent, you have goals for your child to play at an elite level, and/or it is really important to be better than others then emotional reactions and bad sportsmanship are going to occur.

What can be done about problematic parent behavior? Well, first and foremost, it seems to be a loss in perspective of what the game is all about. When involved in a big game

and watching your child out there for all to see it creates a great deal of emotion. And, when we are thinking with our emotional mind we tend to do and say things that wouldn't when we are in a rational state.

Therefore, parents should try to stay in a rational state of mind when watching their children compete. How? Here are a few tips:

1. Remind yourself before a big game about the true meaning of high school sport and how you plan to support by being calm, composed, and encouraging.
2. Hold normal conversations during the event. Go for a walk. Read a paper at halftime. Have a pretzel without feeling you are going to get sick due to the pressure of the game. Try not to live and die with each moment. If you remove yourself from the intensity of the moment you are more likely to think clearly when you are involved in the game.
3. In those big moments when you're child is in the spotlight try your best to look calm and composed. This may be hard to achieve but your child, if he or she looks up at you in the stands, will want to see this demeanor. It will provide them confidence and encouragement. Be the duck in the water. Serene on top of the water, and below the surface paddling like all heck!
4. To remain calm and composed take some deep breaths and snap your perspective back into place remembering that no matter what happens you want to perform as a parent in a way that will make your child proud of you.

At the end of the day every high school parent must take responsibility for modeling good sportsmanship and teaching good values through sport. Armed with a few helpful strategies and even the most intense high school parent can survive the big game without a blow up.

Want more sport parenting advice? Go to www.youthsports.msu.edu