

Respect Sports

Within the sometimes icy “Land of 10,000 Lakes,” Minnesota native Frank White has often seen cold stares and cold shoulders that have become part of youth sports. He’s also seen the heated rage that’s becoming more and more common in athletics.

White, who works as the manager of recreation programs and athletics for the city of Richfield, Minn., has been called Minnesota’s “Guru of Sportsmanship.” To help stress the importance of sportsmanship and proper fan behavior, White formed Respect Sports, an organization dedicated to educating people about the impact violence and verbal abuse have on youth sports and its participants.

“(The poor sportsmanship problem) has occurred over 20 years,” White says. “We have taken an adult model and given it to kids: the importance of winning. People are thinking only about their son or daughter,” he says, and not about the experience.

Part of Respect Sports is a presentation titled, “Violence in Sports: It’s Not a Game Anymore.” Having served as a high school and college official for 30 years, White, who was recently selected to the Minnesota State High School League Hall of Fame as a basketball official, gives the presentation to various parents, coaches, officials, other support personnel and kids. To date, he’s given his presentation to nearly 100 groups.

Using a model provided by the Northfield Youth Baseball Association in Minnesota, White began presenting his program in 2000. It is based on setting a uniform code of conduct and consequences for inappropriate behavior by spectators at youth sports events.

White stressed the key is not only having a code of conduct in place, but also enforcing the guidelines. “In any other public venue, we have consequences for behavior except in youth sports,” White pointed out. “At movies or restaurants, if people get out of hand, they are asked to leave. It has to be the same type of consequence. Sometimes people don’t realize there is a problem. They say, ‘This is the way we have always done it.’”

White is also aware of the televised reminders of physical confrontations that have taken place on the pro and college level during recent months. “Young people are so impressionable. Unfortunately, some kids will pick this up,” White says. “That does have an impact on young people.”

In addition to the impact on kids, verbal and physical confrontations have taken a toll on another group: officials. “In Minnesota, we don’t have enough high school officials,” White says. “That is an outgrowth of the lack of sportsmanship at youth levels. That is discouraging people

from becoming officials. After hearing the negative stuff, when officials leave, they are not coming back.

“It is about creating a new sports environment. We need to train coaches and volunteers better and parents need a code of conduct with consequences.”

Written by Brian Hudgins, a sportswriter from Lafayette, La. To learn more about Frank White's program, visit his website at www.respectsports.com.

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