

# ***THE SPORT BEHAVIOR OF YOUTH, PARENTS, AND COACHES***

## ***The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly***

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This study assessed the frequency of good and poor sport behaviors as perceived by young athletes, parents, and coaches. A secondary goal was to examine related sportspersonship attitudes. A total of 803 young athletes in the fifth through eighth grades, representing 10 different sports, completed a behavioral and attitudinal survey, as did 189 of their parents and 61 of their coaches. The sample was drawn from three regions of the United States. Specific behavioral and attitudinal frequency data suggest that there are significant ethical problems occurring in many youth sport programs. Results are discussed in relation to the concepts of collective norms and moral atmosphere.

Like Rorschach's ink blots, the world of youth sports is open to multiple interpretations. Some see in youth sports a system rife with rampant problems, such as cheating and aggression. They point to abusing adults and disrespectful kids. They see a youth sport world populated by children who cheat, fight, and disrespect opponents and officials, by coaches who encourage such behaviors, and by parents and fans who scream vulgarities at players, coaches, and officials. Others think these perceptions are based only on rare, but

highly publicized incidents. They see the vast majority of children having fun and joyfully learning new skills under the watchful eye of caring mentors. Most likely, there is an element of truth in both perceptions. The playing fields of youth sports are populated neither by angels nor devils, but human beings who often act well, but who sometimes do not.

The extent of ethically-relevant problems in youth sports is a question of considerable cultural and educational interest. Sports are a growing and prominent part of society, with

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approximately 47 million youth participating in organized sport programs (Ewing & Seefeldt, 2002). According to a recent *Monitoring the Future* survey, among eighth graders, 71% of males and 68% of females participate in school athletics (Bachman, Johnston, & O'Malley, 2003). But what kind of experience are they having? For these youth, is sport a den of iniquity or a land of promise, as Martens (1976) once queried?

Unlike perceptions of Rorschach's ink blots, the veracity of the different perceptions of the ethical status of youth sports lends itself to empirical investigation. A study by the Minnesota Amateur Sports Commission, reported in Engh (1999), found that 45% of the children surveyed said adults had called them names, yelled at them, and insulted them while they played sports. Even more disturbing, more than 17% reported that an adult had hit, kicked, and slapped them while participating in sports. Unfortunately, few details of the study are provided and it is hard to discern how representative was the sample.

While there have been several studies seeking to investigate the correlates or causes of poor behavior in youth sport settings (Bredemeier, Weiss, Shields, & Cooper, 1986, 1987; Dunn & Dunn, 1999; Gardner & Janelle, 2002; Gibbons, Ebbeck, & Weiss, 1995; Guivernau & Duda, 2002; Lemyre, Roberts, & Ommundsen, 2002; Miller, Roberts, & Ommundsen, 2004; Ommundsen, Roberts, Lemyre, & Treasure, 2003; Shields, LaVoi, Bredemeier, & Power, 2004; Stephens, 2000, 2001; Stephens & Bredemeier, 1996; Stuart & Ebbeck, 1995), the *frequency* with which such behaviors occur has received little attention.

In the present study, we sampled youth sport participants, coaches, and parents in three regions of the United States to address the following three questions: (1) How frequently do athletes, coaches, and spectators exhibit ethically problematic behaviors in youth sports, as perceived by the young athletes themselves and by parents and coaches? (2) What are the normative expectations for these same behaviors among athletes, parents,

and coaches? And, (3) what attitudes toward sportspersonship behaviors are held by youth, parents, and coaches? In addition to focusing on potential problem areas, we inquired about the frequency of selected sport-related prosocial behaviors.

The present study was designed as a pilot survey of the self- and other-reported behaviors of youth, coaches, and parents. The focus of the survey was on ethically-relevant behaviors, expectations, and attitudes tethered to issues of fairness and respect.

## **METHOD**

### ***Participants***

There were three sets of participants involved in the present investigation: youth, coaches, and parents.

A total of 803 young athletes participated in the study, ranging in age from 9 to 15 ( $M = 12.2$  years,  $SD = 1.15$ ). There were 145 fifth graders, 289 sixth graders, 178 seventh graders, and 191 eighth graders. The athletes were drawn from 10 sports: basketball ( $n = 290$ ), soccer ( $n = 189$ ), baseball/softball ( $n = 109$ ), football ( $n = 58$ ), volleyball ( $n = 50$ ), track ( $n = 48$ ), swimming ( $n = 21$ ), hockey ( $n = 18$ ), lacrosse ( $n = 10$ ), and wrestling ( $n = 10$ ). The sample included 416 males and 375 females, with 12 athletes failing to identify their gender. Approximately 70% of the sample was White/European American, 11% African American, 7% Asian American, 4% Hispanic, and 8% other.

The convenience sample was drawn from urban and suburban schools in three geographic regions: the Philadelphia area ( $n = 124$ ), the South Bend, IN area ( $n = 370$ ), and the San Francisco East Bay area ( $n = 309$ ). All participants were recruited through their schools, and 433 represented school-sponsored sport teams; 345 represented community-sponsored teams, and 25 did not indicate whether their team was school or community affiliated. Four hundred forty-six athletes indicated that they had to try out to be on their

team; 346 indicated that they did not have to try out, and 11 did not answer the question. Years of involvement in their current sport ranged from 0-12 ( $M = 4.2$ ;  $SD = 2.64$ ). Most youth appeared to have a positive experience with their coach; 84% of the youth either “agreed” or “strongly agreed” with the statement, “Our coach makes sport fun and exciting.”

A total of 189 parents (48 male; 133 female; 8 did not provide their gender) participated in the survey, ranging in age from 28 to 57 ( $M = 42.1$ ;  $SD = 5.49$ ). Approximately 85% of the parents were European American, 11% were African American, and 4% were either Hispanic, Asian, biracial, or other. Approximately 48% of the parents reported on the experience of their sons, while 52% reported on the experience of their daughters (9 respondents did not provide the gender of their child). Finally, like the youth, most parents appeared to be satisfied with the quality of the sport experience. Approximately 80% stated that they were “very happy” or “somewhat happy” with their child’s coach and 87% of the parents stated that they were “very happy” or “somewhat happy” with their child’s sport experience.

A total of 61 coaches (47 male; 13 female; 1 failed to state) participated in the survey, ranging in age from 23 to 58 ( $M = 40.4$ ;  $SD = 8.61$ ). Coaches varied in years of experience, ranging from 1 to 34 years ( $M = 9.7$ ;  $SD = 7.88$ ). Approximately 74% of the coaches were European American, 15% African American, 5% Hispanic, and 7% other. The coaches represented the following sports: basketball ( $n = 23$ ), soccer ( $n = 16$ ), track ( $n = 8$ ), baseball/softball ( $n = 6$ ), volleyball ( $n = 6$ ), and football ( $n = 2$ ). There were 39 coaches from the South Bend region and 11 each from Philadelphia and the San Francisco East Bay. Approximately 67% of the coaches had received formal training in coaching. For those that had received training, the number of hours of training ranged from 2 to 200 ( $M = 29.5$ ;  $SD = 43.56$ ).

## **Procedure**

Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects. The researchers then asked for assistance from colleagues at two other universities to help with regional data collections. At each of three sites, researchers contacted appropriate personnel within local school districts, sharing with them the goals and instruments of the study. Once permission to conduct the investigation was obtained, the researchers followed the lead of contacts within the target schools to schedule data collections. After data collection times were established, notice was distributed to coaches and parents inviting them and their young athletes to participate in the survey. The surveys were administered to students, parents, and coaches by researchers. Prior to collection of data from the students, parental informed consent forms were signed and returned, and each student signed an assent form. Both coaches and parents completed informed consent forms prior to filling out the survey. All surveys were anonymous and were administered by researchers in a group setting. Participation in the study was voluntary and open to all students in the fifth through eighth grade who participated in any organized sport program (school sponsored or community sponsored), together with their coaches and parents. Though the study design did not allow for matching athletes with their parents or coaches, all parents were parents of children who participated in the survey, and all coaches were coaches of youth in the survey.

## **Assessment**

The survey focused on ethically-related behaviors that sometimes occur in youth sport contexts by youth, spectators or parents, and coaches, as well as related attitudes. Specifically, themes of cheating, aggression, and disrespect were covered, as well as good sport conduct. There were several “core” items that occurred in all three surveys with minor varia-

tions in wording, as well as items specific to each respondent group.

The youth survey contained seven items designed to tap the respondents' own behavior, seven items designed to tap the respondents' perceptions of likely teammate behavior, 10 items designed to tap perceptions of coach behavior, and eight items designed to tap perceptions of fan/spectator behavior. In addition, there were seven items designed to tap the respondents' attitudes toward good sport behavior (i.e., sportpersonship).

The parent survey contained six items designed to tap the respondents own behavior, seven items designed to tap the respondents' perceptions of the likely behavior of team members, five items designed to tap perceptions of coach behavior, and seven items designed to tap perceptions of fan/spectator behavior. In addition, there were seven items designed to tap the respondents' attitudes toward good sport behavior.

The coach survey contained eight items designed to tap the respondents own behavior, seven items designed to tap the respondents' perceptions of the likely behavior of team members, and seven items designed to tap perceptions of fan/spectator behavior. In addition, there were seven items designed to tap the respondents' attitudes toward good sport behavior.

Survey items were of three types. Most items used a "yes/no" format in which respondents were first asked if a particular behavior occurred during the past season. If a respondent checked *yes*, he or she was then asked to indicate how frequently the behavior occurred: once or twice, a few times, or often. A second item type asked respondents how many members of the team would likely behave in a particular way. Response options were "none," "a few," "several," and "most." Finally, several items asked respondents to indicate their level of agreement with a statement, using a 4-point response scale with 1 indicating "strongly disagree," 2 indicating "somewhat disagree," 3 indicating "somewhat agree," and 4 indicating "strongly agree."

After initial instrument development, the survey was piloted on a small sample of youth ( $n = 8$ ) who were also interviewed. Following pilot testing, several items were slightly revised. Finally, a panel of four experienced researchers and two age-level appropriate teachers confirmed the face validity of the items.

## **RESULTS**

Results are reported in two sections. First, we present frequency and descriptive statistics drawn from the surveys. Deliberately, response summaries are presented with only minimal analysis, enabling the reader to inspect responses to each survey item. Second, we present inferential statistics designed to test the null hypothesis that the frequency data did not differ by demographic variables.

### ***Descriptive Statistics***

Key findings in this section are organized under nine headings. The first two report on the behavior or likely behavior of youth. The next four sections report on the behavior of parents and coaches, either self-reported and/or other-reported. The following section examines the behavior of spectators. This is followed by a section on the self-reported attitudes of the three respondent groups about good sport behaviors. Finally, the prosocial behavior of each of the three groups is reported.

#### ***Behavior of Youth: Self-Report***

There were seven items that asked the young athletes to report on their own behavior. All items used the same "yes/no" format described above. Table 1 presents the percent of respondents answering "yes" to each item, as well as the percent of respondents (among those who answered "yes") who selected each frequency category. Results are provided for

TABLE 1  
Self-Report Behavior of Youth

Question	Total			Males			Females					
	% Yes	A	B	C	% Yes	A	B	C	% Yes	A	B	C
1	9	60	19	21	13	62	17	21	5	55	25	20
2	13	55	26	19	15	46	27	27	9	68	27	6
3	38	54	29	17	40	48	29	23	37	62	28	9
4	31	57	28	15	35	58	23	18	27	54	36	10
5	17	59	28	13	21	57	26	18	13	62	31	7
6	13	71	18	12	17	68	16	16	9	74	23	3
7	27	69	20	10	26	66	19	14	28	73	21	6

A = Once or Twice; B = A Few Times; C = Often

Questions: [In the most recent season] have you ever ...

1. Cheated to help your team win?
2. Tried to hurt an opponent?
3. Tried to "get back" at an opponent?
4. Argued with a ref or sport official?
5. Said something to hurt/anger an opponent?
6. Made fun of a less-skilled teammate?
7. Acted like a "bad sport" after a loss?

the sample as a whole and for males and females separately.

An examination of Table 1 reveals that ethically questionable behaviors occurred with some frequency in our sample. Nine percent of youth admitted to cheating, which is the behavior with the lowest reported incidence rate. Thirty-eight percent acknowledged having tried to "get back" at an opponent who plays dirty, suggesting that a tit-for-tat revenge morality is common among youth sport participants. The other behavioral percentages fell between these numbers.

*Behavior of Youth: Perceptions of Others*

In addition to answering questions about their own behavior, youth were asked how many of their teammates would engage in various forms of behavior. It is important to note that these are hypothetical questions, asking respondents not whether they have specifically observed the target behaviors, but rather how many of their teammates would likely engage in the behaviors if the situation arose. This type of question, designed to tap behavior expectations, has been used in numerous studies to assess targeted dimensions of the "moral

atmosphere" of a team (Guivernau & Duda, 1998; 2002; Kavussanu & Roberts, 2001; Kavussanu, Roberts, & Ntoumanis, 2002; Miller, Roberts, & Ommundsen, 2004; Shields, Bredemeier, Gardner, & Bostrom, 1995; Smith, 2003; Stephens, 2000, 2001; Stephens & Bredemeier, 1996; Stephens, Bredemeier & Shields, 1997; Stephens & Kavanagh, 2003; Stornes, 2001; Stuart & Ebbeck, 1995). In addition to the youth responding to these questions, both parents and coaches responded to parallel items about the team. Table 2 presents the perceptions of youth, parents, and coaches with regard to how likely they believe team members are to engage in particular forms of behavior.

A quick survey of the numbers presented in Table 2 reveals that most respondents believed that either "none" or only "a few" members of the team would behave in the seven indicated ways. Comparing these data with those of Table 1 offers some interesting contrasts and comparisons. While, for example, 31% of youth admitted that they themselves have argued with a ref or sport official, only 9% thought that most of their teammates would behave similarly. With regard to cheating, 9% of youth acknowledged cheating themselves, and that same percentage

Au: Add Smith 2003 to references or delete.

TABLE 2  
Perceptions of Likely Team Member Behavior: Percentages by Youth, Parents, and Coaches

Question	Response Selected											
	None			A Few			Several			Most		
	Respondent Group			Respondent Group			Respondent Group			Respondent Group		
	Youth	Parents	Coaches	Youth	Parents	Coaches	Youth	Parents	Coaches	Youth	Parents	Coaches
1	62	72	80	28	23	17	5	4	2	4	1	1
2	65	84	93	24	14	7	6	2	0	5	1	0
3	40	44	55	33	46	38	15	9	7	12	1	0
4	34	43	50	39	49	45	18	7	5	9	1	0
5	55	49	62	30	47	35	10	3	3	6	1	0
6	59	52	62	27	39	38	9	7	0	5	2	0
7	38	35	46	39	55	48	14	8	7	9	2	0

How many members of the team would...

1 = Cheat if it would help your team win?

2 = Hurt an opponent if it would help your team win?

3 = "Get back" at an opponent who plays dirty?

4 = Argue with a ref or sport official following a bad call?

5 = Say things to hurt, anger, or upset an opponent?

6 = Make fun of a less skilled team member?

7 = Act like a "bad sport" when your team loses?

TABLE 3  
Self-Reported Parental Behavior

Question	Percent Yes	If "yes," how often? (%)		
		Once/Twice	Few Times	Often
1	13	61	26	13
2	0	—	—	—
3	5	70	20	10
4	14	74	26	0
5	2	100	0	0
6	10	84	16	—

[In the past season] have you ever ...

1. Angrily criticized your child's sport performance?

2. Encouraged your child to hurt an opponent to help the team win?

3. Encouraged your child to "get back" at an opponent to help your team win?

4. Loudly yelled at or argued with a ref or sport official following a bad call?

5. Acted like a "bad sport" when your child's team lost?

6. At a sport event, acted in a way that you later regretted?

believed that either "several" or "most" of their teammates would cheat.

### *Behavior of Parents: Self-Report*

The parent survey contained six items designed to assess behaviors related to parenting the good sport. Three items specifically

addressed how the parent has acted with his or her child, while the other three items focused on the parent's behavior as a spectator. The results are presented in Table 3.

For the three questions tapping parental behavior toward their child, on average only 6% of parents acknowledged having acted in the targeted way. The item with the highest

response rate (13%) was the one that asked whether the parent had ever angrily criticized their child’s sport performance. For the three items that tapped whether the parent demonstrated poor sport behavior as a spectator, the average rate of affirmative response was 8.7%. The item with the highest response rate (14%) was the one that asked whether the parent had ever loudly yelled at or argued with a ref or sport official.

*Behavior of Parents: Child-Report*

The youth survey contained one item on parental behavior which asked the young athlete to indicate their level of agreement with the statement, “My parents get angry with me when I don’t play or do well.” The mean response on the 4-point Likert-type scale was 1.51 (*SD* = .88), indicating that most youth disagreed with the statement. However, while most disagreed, there were still 9% of respondents who “somewhat agreed” with the statement and 6% who “strongly agreed.”

Though not tethered directly to behavior, a second item offers some insight into the

child’s valuing of parental involvement in their sport experience. Using the same Likert-type scale, children were queried whether they agreed with the statement, “I enjoy my sport more when my parents (or guardians) come to watch.” The mean response was 3.18 (*SD* = .95). Clearly, most of the youth in our sample enjoyed having their parents attend competitions. Still, 13% “somewhat disagreed” and 8% “strongly disagreed” with the statement.

*Behavior of Coaches: Self-Report*

The survey contained eight items that asked coaches to self-report on their own behavior. The items covered encouraging aggression and cheating, arguing with officials, making fun of a team member, and acting like a “bad sport” when the team lost. Table 4 presents the percent of coaches who answered “yes” to each question and, for those who answered yes, the percent of coaches who selected each frequency response option. Examination of the table reveals that a relatively high percentages of coaches acknowledged having loudly argued with a sport official, and having angrily

TABLE 4  
Self-Reported Behavior of Coaches

Question	Percent Yes	If “yes” how often? (%)		
		Once/Twice	Few Times	Often
1	0	—	—	—
2	7	75	25	0
3	0	—	—	—
4	10	67	33	—
5	42	60	32	8
6	36	64	23	14
7	8	60	20	20
8	2	100	—	—

- [In your most recent season] have you ever ...
1. Encouraged an athlete or the team to cheat to help your team win?
  2. Taught your team how to break a rule and get away with it?
  3. Encouraged an athlete to hurt an opponent to help your team win?
  4. Encouraged an athlete to “get back” at an opponent who plays dirty?
  5. Loudly argued with a ref or sport official following a bad call?
  6. Angrily yelled at a player for making a mistake?
  7. Make fun of a team member?
  8. Acted like a “bad sport” when your team lost?

TABLE 5  
The Behavior of Coaches as Perceived by Youth

Question	Percent Yes	If "yes" how often? (%)		
		Once/Twice	Few Times	Often
1	7	49	22	29
2	9	53	33	13
3	8	44	30	26
4	26	49	35	16
5	48	50	32	18
6	35	51	24	25
7	11	58	25	17
8	19	53	29	18
9	27	60	30	10
10	4	48	15	37

[During the most recent season] has your coach ever:

1. Encouraged cheating to help your team win?
2. Taught the team how to break a rule and get away with it?
3. Encouraged hurting an opponent to help your team win?
4. Encouraged "getting back" at an opponent who plays dirty?
5. Angrily argued with a ref or sport official?
6. Angrily yelled at a player for making a mistake?
7. Made fun of a member of the team?
8. Acted like a "bad sport" following a loss?
9. Said bad things about an opponent?
10. Hit or kicked you or someone else on the team?

yelled at a player for making a mistake (42% and 36% respectively).

#### *Behavior of Coaches: Other-Report*

Not only were coaches asked to self-report on their behavior, the young athletes were also asked to indicate whether they had observed various behaviors on the part of their coaches. Table 5 presents the percentages of youth who answered "yes" to whether they had seen the coach act in the described way, followed by the percent of youth, among those who had answered "yes" to the stem item, who selected each frequency option. In addition to the eight items that were asked of coaches, youth were also asked whether their coach had said bad things about opponents and whether their coach had hit, kicked, or slapped a team member.

The two items on which the highest percentages of youth answered "yes" corresponded to the same two items on which the

coach self-reported the behaviors. Thus, 48% of youth (compared to 42% of coaches) reported that the coach angrily argued with a sport official, and 35% of youth (compared to 36% of coaches) indicated that the coach had angrily yelled at a player for making a mistake. Interestingly, 26% of youth, but only 10% of coaches, reported that the coach encouraged "getting back" at an opponent. "Getting back" was the behavior with the highest rate of self-report by the youth.

The parent survey was constructed differently with parents asked to respond to items on a 4-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 indicating "strongly disagree" to 4, indicating "strongly agree." The content of several items closely paralleled that of items in the surveys for coaches and youth. The results are presented in Table 6.

Inspection of Table 6 suggests that most parents have positive expectations regarding the behavior of their children's coaches. Still, sizeable minorities of parents think coaches might tolerate an athlete cheating (14%) or



TABLE 6  
Parental Perceptions of Coaches

Item	% Agree*	M	SD
1	86	3.67	.794
2	91	3.69	.723
3	80	3.18	.896
4	9	1.77	1.042
5	8	1.56	1.062

\* Percent of respondents who selected either "agree" or "strongly agree" with the statement  
Items:

1. The coach would not tolerate cheating, even if it would help the team win.
2. The coach would not tolerate any member of the team trying to hurt an opponent.
3. The coach never angrily argues with the calls of refs or sport officials.
4. The coach angrily yells at members of the team.
5. The coach encourages the kids to think negative thoughts about their opponents

hurting an opponent (9%). Twenty percent of parents either "disagreed" or "strongly disagreed" with the statement that their child's coach never angrily argues with sport officials. Interestingly, 91% of parents either "disagreed" or "strongly disagreed" with the statement that the coach angrily yells at members of the team. The reader will recall that this behavior was one of the most frequently cited behaviors by youth and coaches alike.

#### *Behavior of Spectators: Perceptions of Youth, Parents & Coaches*

All three respondent groups were asked about the behavior of those who attend youth sport events. The "yes/no" question format was used across the three surveys, making for easy comparison. Table 7 presents the percentages of respondents who observed various target behaviors on the part of spectators and, if so, how often.

In terms of frequency, the item that stands out most clearly from the others is the one asking whether the respondent had seen a fan angrily yell at a sport official. Significant majorities of all three groups reported having witnessed that behavior. Both large numbers of parents and coaches (59% each) also reported having been embarrassed by the behavior of a fan, though this was true of only 38% of youth.

#### *Attitudes Toward Good Sport Behaviors*

The final set of variables pertains to the respondents' attitudes toward good sport behaviors. To assess these attitudes, we asked respondents to indicate their level of agreement with a set of seven items. Table 8 presents the results, both in terms of the percentage of respondents who answered "agree" or "strongly agree" to each item, as well as the means and standard deviations of responses. Overall, the table seems to indicate that there is significant disagreement, both across respondent groups and within each group, with regard to the norms of good sport behavior. Exceptions to this general observation, however, can be found in the parent and coach groups with regard to cheating and faking an injury. In both cases, respondents were relatively uniform in disapproving of these behaviors.

#### *Prosocial Behaviors of Youth, Parents, and Coaches*

Two items on the youth survey tapped prosocial behaviors. First, respondents were asked how much they agreed or disagreed with the statement, "On our team, we try our best to be good sports." The mean response on the 4-point Likert-type scale was 3.58 ( $SD = .604$ ). Approximately, 96% of the youth either "agreed" or "strongly agreed" with the state-

TABLE 7  
The Behavior of Spectators: Perceptions of Youth, Parents, and Coaches

Question	Youth			Parents			Coaches					
	% Yes	A	B	C	% Yes	A	B	C	%Yes	A	B	C
1	5	22	30	49	—	—	—	—	2	100	0	0
2	8	58	22	20	2	33	67	0	5	100	0	0
3	17	65	22	13	12	54	32	14	7	75	0	25
4	43	56	33	11	—	—	—	—	36	48	33	19
5	41	51	33	16	25	66	21	13	41	52	44	4
6	68	29	35	36	74	35	41	24	75	18	50	32
7	39	49	32	19	44	53	41	6	(see #4)			
8	—	—	—	—	25	72	21	7	—	—	—	—
9	38	53	31	16	59	45	34	21	59	46	35	19

A = Once or Twice; B = A Few Times; C = Often

Questions: [In the most recent season] *have you ever ...*

1. Been physically attacked by a fan?
2. Seen a fan hit another adult?
3. Been scared by the behavior of a fan?
4. Been teased or yelled at by someone watching?
5. Seen a fan angrily tell at or tease a player?
6. Seen a fan angrily yell at an official?
7. Seen a fan angrily yell at a coach?
8. Seen a fan angrily yell at another spectator?
9. Been embarrassed by the behavior of a fan?

TABLE 8  
Attitudes Toward Sportsmanship: Youth, Parents, and Coaches

Item	Youth			Parents			Coaches		
	% Agree <sup>a</sup>	M	SD	% Agree <sup>a</sup>	M	SD	% Agree <sup>a</sup>	M	SD
1	14	1.52	0.885	0	1.05	0.215	3	1.13	.430
2	32	2.04	1.007	12	1.49	0.802	8	1.38	.640
3	25	1.88	0.988	26	1.88	0.922	34	2.00	.947
4	22	1.69	0.993	10	1.38	0.754	10	1.42	.671
5	29	1.98	1.057	8	1.31	0.622	13	1.55	.928
6	12	1.42	0.825	2	1.08	0.358	5	1.22	.691
7	41	2.30	0.988	20	1.73	0.838	13	1.58	.889

<sup>a</sup> Percent of respondents who selected either "agree" or "strongly agree" with the statement

Items:

1. It is OK to break rules if you can get away with it.
2. When a ref or sport official makes a bad call, it is OK for athletes to argue.
3. When a ref or sport official makes a bad call, it is OK for the coach to yell criticism.
4. Taunting opponents or "trash talking" is just part of sport.
5. It is OK for fans to boo the other team.
6. Faking an injury is an acceptable way to gain an advantage.
7. After an athlete makes a good play or does well, it is fine for that athlete to celebrate in a flashy and public way.

ment. The second statement asked respondents how much they agreed or disagreed with the statement, "On our team, we encourage each other to be good sports." The mean response

was 3.36 ( $SD = .741$ ) with 89% of the youth selecting either "agree" or "strongly agree."

Parents were asked whether they had talked at home about the importance of being a good

sport and, if so, how often. Approximately 95% of the parents indicated that they had talked about the importance of being a good sport, with 11% indicating they had done so “once or twice,” 22% indicating that they had done so “a few times,” and 67% indicating that they had done so “often.”

Finally, coaches were asked three questions that tapped prosocial behaviors or attitudes. First, they were asked how much they agreed or disagreed with the statement, “Teaching sportsmanship is a major part of a coach’s job.” The mean response was 3.78 ( $SD = .454$ ), indicating very high agreement with the statement. Similarly, the coaches were asked how much they agreed with the statement, “Coaches have a responsibility to help the members of their team become better people, not just better athletes.” The mean response was 3.77 ( $SD = .424$ ), again indicating strong agreement. Finally, coaches were asked if they talked about the importance of being a good sport and, if so, how often. Every coach indicated that they talked about the importance of being a good sport, with 5% indicating that they did so “once or twice,” 19% indicating that they did so “a few times,” and 75% indicating that they did so “often.”

### ***Inferential Statistics***

The focus of our inferential statistics was on the self-reported behavior of youth, coaches, and parents. In each case, we sought to determine whether there were significant differences related to demographic variables. For the youth, we were interested in whether there were differences related to gender, grade level, and/or sport area. For the parents, we were interested in whether there were differences based on either the parents’ gender or the gender of the child. And for the coaches, we were interested in whether there were differences based on gender and/or whether the coach had received training. We did not examine parent or coach differences related to the sport type of the child or team because our parent and coach

samples were too small to give the test sufficient power to address this issue.

Before conducting the multivariate analyses, the behavior items responses were coded on a four-point scale by labeling a “no” response as 1, and a “yes” answer as either a 2, 3, or 4 depending on whether the respondent indicated that they had done the behavior “once or twice,” “a few times,” or “often.” In addition, we examined whether the assumption of homogeneity of variance was supported and found that it was not. However, we continued with the analyses since multivariate analyses of variance tend to be highly robust to violations of this type of assumption (Box, 1954).

To test for demographic variation within the youth sample, we conducted a three-way between-groups multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA), with gender, grade level, and sport type entered as independent variables and the seven self-report behaviors entered as dependent variables. The multivariate effect was significant for grade,  $F(24, 705) = 3.994, p < .001, \lambda = .691$ ; partial  $\eta^2 = .12$ , and sport type,  $F(56, 1314) = 2.038, p < .001, \lambda = .639$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .06$ , but not for gender,  $F(8, 243) = .772, p = .63, \lambda = .975$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .03$ . Due to the large number of possible comparisons both within main and interaction effects, we decided to reduce the complexity by reporting statistically significant results only when they were also significant from a practical standpoint. To make this determination, we focused on effect size and set a cut-off point for partial  $\eta^2$  of .10. Statistically significant results with a partial eta-squared of less than .10 were discarded as having little practical significance. Using this criterion, only the grade level effect was determined worthy of further analysis. No other main or interaction effect reached the cut-off level.

When results for the dependent variables were considered separately, there were significant grade level differences for four of the behavioral measures (cheating, “getting back”, arguing with officials, and trash talking), but none of these achieved our minimum eta cut-off. Thus, although there were develop-

mental trends suggesting that students in higher grades reported higher frequencies of problematic behavior, the differences, while statistically significant, were negligible from a practical standpoint.

To test for possible demographic variation within the parent sample, we conducted a two-way MANOVA, entering parent gender and gender of the child as independent variables and the six parental self-report behavior items as dependent variables. There was a significant main effect for parent gender,  $F(5, 177) = 4.046, p = .002, \lambda = .897$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .10$ , but not for child's gender,  $F(5, 177) = .555, p = .734, \lambda = .985$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .02$ . When the results for the dependent variables were considered separately, the only dependent variable on which parents differed significantly was the one that asked whether the respondent had yelled at a sport official, with fathers acknowledging having done so more than mothers. However, even this difference was relatively small with  $\eta^2$  only .10, barely making our cut-off for practical significance.

Finally, to test the null hypothesis that there was no variation by gender or training (yes vs. no) among the coaches, we conducted a two-factor MANOVA with gender and training entered as the independent variables and the eight self-report behavior items as the dependent variables. The analysis revealed no significant effects and, thus, the null hypothesis was not rejected (for coach gender,  $F(6, 50) = 1.18, p = .332, \lambda = .876$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .12$ ; for coach training,  $F(6, 50) = .541, p = .775, \lambda = .939$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .061$ ).

## **DISCUSSION**

We discuss our results in five sections: the behavior of youth, the behavior of parents, the behavior of coaches, attitudes toward good sport behaviors, and prosocial sport behavior.

### ***The Behavior of Youth***

The results from the survey demonstrate that youth sports may not be "out of control" as

some critics allege, but there certainly are reasons for concern. Consider the following:

- Nearly one out of every 10 youth acknowledged cheating, with 21% of these indicating that they had cheated often.
- 13% of the youth admitted to having tried to hurt an opponent, with 19% of these acknowledging that they had tried to do so often.
- 31% of the youth indicated that they had argued with a sport official.
- 13% of the youth admitted having made fun of a less-skilled teammate.
- 27% reported that they had acted like "bad sports."

Problems such as these suggest that youth sport, for many, may be a less than optimal experience. If two teams are playing basketball, it is likely, according to the data, that someone on the floor may take advantage of an opportunity to cheat.

The fact that 13% of the youth acknowledged having made fun of a teammate suggests that on most teams there is a high probability that one or more of the lesser skilled players has been at least mildly victimized. This would suggest that coaches should be alert to the possibility of bullying and proactively seek to reduce it.

In six of the seven categories of poor sport behavior, boys appear to exhibit the behavior more frequently than girls. The lone exception pertains to having acted like a "bad sport." One explanation for this deviation from the pattern may reside in the more subjective nature of the item. While such behaviors as cheating, hurting, and arguing are relatively straightforward, whether one has acted like a "bad sport" is more of a subjective judgment. It may be that girls believe that they have acted like a bad sport more often than boys simply because their socialization has promoted a lower level of tolerance for poor sport behavior; it may also be that girls are more willing than boys to acknowledge having acted like a poor sport.

However, further investigation of gender differences in this area is clearly needed since our gender effect did not reach statistical significance.

In addition to self-reported behavior, we also asked each respondent group to indicate how many members of the team would likely behave in particular ways. These questions were designed to suggest the relative presence or absence of “collective norms” (Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989) supporting good sport behaviors. Strong prosocial collective norms suggest a “moral atmosphere” that is supportive of character development, mature moral reasoning, and prosocial behavior (Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989; Shields & Brede-meier, 2005). Table 2 reports the perceptions of youth, parents, and coaches with regard to how they think members of the team are likely to behave. If the vast majority of a respondent group agrees that “none” of the members of a team are likely to engage in a particular behavior, then there is a high probability that there is a shared understanding within that respondent group that such behavior is not appropriate (Shields et al., 1995).

Table 2 suggests that few clear collective norms exist within youth sports, at least in terms of the dimensions that we tapped with our survey items. Among the youth, there was no clear consensus that team members would not engage in any of the listed behaviors. Parents and coaches generally thought a norm existed against hurting an opponent, but the fact that their perception was not matched by a similar perception among the youth suggests that the norm was not likely to be very clear or salient. Of course, our data are aggregate in nature and cannot be used to suggest that there are no individual teams with such norms. The data only suggest that such norms do not appear prevalent in youth sports. From a practical standpoint, this finding indicates that there is still much work to be done to build strong collective norms around issues of fairness and respect.

### ***The Behavior of Parents***

Parents play an important role in their children’s development and value formation. Fortunately, no parents reported having encouraged their child to hurt an opponent, although a few apparently counseled “getting back” at an opponent who played dirty. Parents also did not self-report having behaved like a “bad sport” to an appreciable extent, even though 14% acknowledged having loudly yelled at or argued with a ref or sport official, with fathers apparently more verbally aggressive than mothers. Perhaps of greatest concern in the parent self-report data is the 13% who acknowledged having angrily criticized their child’s sport performance. This number closely aligns with the 15% of youth who reported that their parents get angry when they don’t do well. Such behavior on the part of parents is likely counterproductive both to skill development and to the development of healthy attitudes toward competition. It may also account for why nearly 21% of youth apparently prefer that their parents stay home rather than watch their competitions. It may also contribute to the high level of drop-out from sports that occurs during this developmental period (Ewing & Seefeldt, 2002).

### ***The Behavior of Coaches***

Ideally, coaches are the guardians of the best traditions and practices of sport. They are the adults entrusted by parents and society to nurture and support the growth of young athletes. No doubt, most coaches are well-intentioned and have the best interests of the kids at heart. Still, the survey suggests that problems with coaches, sometimes severe, are not uncommon in youth sports.

It is interesting to compare the self-reported behaviors of coaches with the reports provided by the youth. Interpreting the comparisons needs to be done with caution, since the coaches in the study represent only a subset of the coaches on which the youth reported, but the findings are suggestive. Except for the

question about yelling at a player for making a mistake, where the frequency reports were almost identical, the youth always reported problematic coaching behavior more often than did the coaches themselves. This may be an artifact of the coaches' self-reports being biased by social desirability factors. However, even the youth, who generally reported liking their coaches, may have been similarly motivated to underreport negative coaching behavior. It may also be that coaches who behave in less desirable ways are less likely to participate in a voluntary survey of coaching behaviors. For these reasons, the numbers should not be taken too literally, but only as ballpark estimates of the likely minimum frequency of problem behaviors.

While no coaches acknowledged encouraging athletes to cheat or hurt an opponent, 7 and 8%, respectively, of youth reported their coaches did these things. Though these percentages are relatively small, they still represent a large number of coaches. Would we be content if similar percentages of teachers encouraged their students to cheat on tests? Perhaps even more disturbing is the number of coaches who apparently create hostile psychological climates. According to both sets of reports, well over a third of all coaches angrily yell at players for making mistakes. Remembering that these are children still learning the skills of their sports, this high rate of angry critique is cause for significant concern. Even 11% of youth and 8% of coaches report that the coach, during the most recent season, made fun of a team member, with 20% of those coaches, by their own estimates, having done so often. Again, the comparison with teachers may be helpful. What would we think if a third of our teachers yelled at students for making mistakes, and 1 in 10 made fun of a student?

The number of youth in our study who reported having been hit, kicked, or slapped by their coaches (4%) is considerably below, fortunately, the 17% reported in the study by the Minnesota Amateur Sports Commission. Still, even 4% is high for such inappropriate behavior. If our sample is representative of the larger

youth sport population, this would suggest that there are nearly 2 million kids being hit, kicked, or slapped by their coaches each year.

### ***The Behavior of Spectators***

The behavior of spectators at youth sport events is clearly an area of concern. Whether one focuses on the reports of the youth, parents, or coaches, significant percentages report high levels of inappropriate conduct. Perhaps the question about whether the respondent had been embarrassed by the behavior of a fan sums up the data well, with 38% of youth and 59% of both parents and coaches indicating that they had. Five percent of youth even reported having been physically attacked by a spectator, and 17% reported having been scared by the behavior of a fan. Can we expect children to develop healthy attitudes toward competition in such an environment?

It is important to remember that most spectators at youth sport events are parents of the participants. When inappropriate behavior occurs it is often by one's own parents or the parents of friends or teammates. The close personal bond between the players and spectators at youth sport events only underscores the importance of good conduct on the sidelines. Strategies need to be improved for controlling inappropriate yelling, as well as more serious forms of harmful behavior.

### ***Attitudes Toward Good Sport Behavior***

It may be that youth, parents, and coaches occasionally act in the heat of the moment in ways that they would not endorse at calmer times, and that learning skills of emotional self-regulation is key to improvement. It may also be that beliefs about what constitutes appropriate good sport behavior underlie some of the problems. Our data do not allow causal models to be tested, but we did collect suggestive data about attitudes or beliefs with regard to good sport behavior. Especially among the youth, there is cause for concern. Cheating was approved by 14% of the youth; 32% thought it

is fine to argue with officials; 22% accepted trash-talking as simply part of the game, 29% approved of booing, 12% agreed that faking an injury is alright, and 41% accepted flashy, egoistic celebration. In all of these cases, parents and coaches had stronger prosocial attitudes or beliefs. The relatively high rate of endorsement of poor sport behaviors by the youth suggests that there is a substantial problem with the moral culture of many youth sport programs. The only item where parents and coaches agreed in higher percentages to a questionable behavior was the one about the coach arguing with the official. It is important to point out that the item talked about “yelling criticism” at the official, not quietly or discreetly inquiring as to why a call was made.

### ***Prosocial Behavior***

Encouragingly, 96% of the youth sample indicated that their team tries to be good sports. At least to the extent that they understand and accept the norms of good sport behavior, most youth try to follow them. Not surprisingly, a slightly lower percentage stated that they encourage each other to be good sports. It is certainly more demanding to actually encourage one another to be good sports than to simply try to follow good sport norms, yet even 89% of youth indicated that they took this more proactive step.

Support for good sport behavior is also apparent at home, with 95% of parents indicating that they talk about the importance of being a good sport. And coaches appear to accept teaching good sport behavior and helping young athletes develop as people as part of their job. All the coaches indicated that they talked about the importance of good sport behavior, with 75% indicating that they did so often.

The data suggest that there is a strong desire on the part of parents and coaches to teach positive sport behaviors. A reasonable question is why do such high levels of poor sport behaviors persist among youth, coaches, parents, and fans when all seem to agree that good sport

behavior is important, and parents and coaches state that they actively seek to teach it? Part of the problem is likely cultural, with less than optimal modeling on the part of participants in commercial sports. It may also be that a more sustained and serious dialogue needs to take place at all levels of sport with regard to expected behaviors. We would particularly encourage coaches to engage in open-ended and frequent dialogue (not monologue) with their players about what is appropriate and inappropriate behavior, seeking to develop consensus within the team. Developing strong collective norms within the group can be one of the most effective ways to counter negative influences from beyond the group (Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989). Based on both the attitudinal findings and the findings related to behavior expectations of team members, it is clear that the concept of “good sport” is lacking sufficient behavioral specificity.

### ***FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS***

The data gathered in the present investigation offer a number of intriguing findings with regard to the world of youth sports. The survey provides an important initial step in empirically documenting the current state of sportpersonship. Still, future research is needed to confirm and extend the present findings. Our sample represented three geographical regions of the country, but it was not a nationally representative sample and we cannot claim that our results generalize to the entire population of youth sport participants, coaches, and parents. Conducting a large-scale, nationally representative survey would be highly valuable. The size of our sample, particularly with regard to some sports, also did not allow for direct comparison across sport areas. We do not know, for example, whether the frequency of problem behaviors is different at soccer matches than at track meets. Both common sense and anecdotal evidence suggest that sport cultures vary with regard to

norms about behavior, and future research might seek to address this question directly.

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In our youth sports association, our parents are not allowed to be hands-on unless they have been certified to do so as an actual coach or assistant. It is written in our bylaws that parents are not allowed to be anywhere on the field, and are restricted from bench areas. Most of this restriction was a result of other parents wanting to be genuinely helpful, but became too touchy with kids that were not their own. Some parents did not like this, but the main reason was that one parent asked the simple question at one of our monthly meetings. "How do I know one of these coaches aren't a registered sex offender and just moved here to escape his/her past?" Was it uncommon behavior for youth sports parents? Definitely not. These displays of poor parental behavior are common at youth sporting events. Year after year we're presented with examples such as the following: Two people punched and then 6-man fight at a 7-year-old basketball game. It's up to parents and coaches to encourage multi-sport participation because players aren't aware of the negatives that will inevitably become more and more clear over time. Here are just a few superstar athletes who were multi-sport athletes before going on to flourish professionally in basketball: Tim Duncan, arguably one of the top 10 players to ever play in the NBA, was an incredibly talented swimmer and had aspirations to compete in the 1992 Olympic Games. If you're a new parent to youth sports, here's some advice for your game time behavior: Let the coaches coach, referees ref, players play and parents parent. Coaches will sometimes try to ref and it doesn't work out well. Parents will sometime try to jump roles to coach or ref, or both. That doesn't work well either. What do players want from parents at games? Even if you know the sport, try playing more and coaching less. Let your child come to you asking for advice. Advice yields better results when you have a receptive audience. 4.) Look for ways to help the team. From bringing snacks to helping coach at practice when the assistant is an outing of town, there are many ways parents can help the team. Parental Responses to Professional Behaviors in Coaching and Teaching. *Sport Science Review*, vol XXI, no. 5-6, 2012, pp. 69-96. DOI: 10.2478/v10237-012-0019-1. Shields D. L., Bredemeier B. L., LaVoi N. M., Power F. C. The sport behavior of youth, parents, and coaches: The good, the bad, and the ugly. *Journal of Research in Character Education*, 2005, 3(1), 43-59. The sport behaviour of youth, parents and coaches. *Journal of Research in Character Education*, 3(1), 43-59. Parents and coaches play a particular role in dealing with the development of youth athletes, while medical professionals must understand that the relationship between the patient and clinician and the expectation of the social contract is changed through the dynamics of the triadic nature of healthcare in youth sports. View. Show abstract. The behavior of youth, parents, and coaches: The good, the bad, and the ugly. Article. Jan 2005.