

Sportsmanship (Third Place 2002)

By Molly Gallagher

Reading Memorial High School

After being involved in every sport imaginable for at least a portion of my childhood, I think it is safe to say I have witnessed every degree of good or bad sportsmanship. I have always been an extremely competitive person who treats every game like a battle and have been the proud recipient of the "most aggressive award" in nearly all of my sports - even horseback riding. During my games, I was completely serious; I wanted to win and I hated my opposition from the depths of my soul until that last buzzer or whistle blew; then we would line up and shake hands, no matter what happened during the game, whether we won or lost. I always thought that this was right, and this was how it had to be, until the day that I helped out at a Challenger Soccer game.

"Go John!" shouted David. I giggled.

"What are you laughing at?" asked David, the little boy with Tourettes' Syndrome.

"Well, I just thought that was silly of you. John isn't even on your team!"

"I know, but he is very good. He almost scored!"

David ran off and I dismissed his comment almost as quickly as it had happened. After watching the game for a couple of minutes, I began to realize that something really special had happened right in front of me. At one point, Danielle, a young girl who is completely blind in one eye, and losing vision in her other, tripped over the ball. All of the players rushed towards Danielle and the ball, but to my surprise, instead of trying to steal the ball and score, they were more concerned with Danielle. The team she was playing against reached down and helped her up as they led her back to where the ball had rolled. They all backed away as they told her to try again. And it finally hit me: these kids were playing this game because they loved it.

All at once I was struck with a feeling of enlightenment. This was true sportsmanship. They didn't play to boost themselves up by beating the other team or by putting them down, they simply played to play soccer. They cheered for the people who they were against and they helped each other whenever they needed it. Once they even let a boy score who had started to cry because he had never scored a goal.

Even though I believe that I play my sports simply for fun, I suddenly realized that I had in fact met my complete opposite on the field that day. When I would play, I would hold myself to unreasonable standards; and these children, although they were not very good when compared to my high school teams, it didn't matter to them. It didn't matter who was better than whom and it didn't even matter who scored the most goals in a season. These kids loved seeing each other do well despite which team they were on, whereas I would be appalled at the thought of conversing with my opponent during a game. In this one instance of watching these children, I realized that I was comparing two extremes. Which form of competition is better? Well, like most extremes, there must be a little bit of both worlds for there to be a successful balance. These children that I watched in awe would look forward to their games all week, and

although they would enjoy each meeting more than I think anyone but them could imagine, they were lacking the element of competition.

We cannot expect all games to be like this because competition is a natural part of any game. However, true sportsmanship is embodied by players who can engage in an intense competition with a desire to win and yet still respect themselves, their teammates, their opponents and the officials. Sportsmanship is the ability to win with dignity and to respect how well the competition played as well as to understand their disappointment and ultimate defeat. And most importantly, sportsmanship is the ability to rise above the frustration of a game or the disappointment of a loss to become a classy, respectful competitor.