



# Intervening on the Sidelines

## An Honoring-the-Game Plan for Coaches

Prevention is the best cure. Coaches who create a team culture based on Honoring the Game likely will have fewer problems with parents and fans on the sidelines. But some parents and fans will inevitably misbehave when things go against their team or child. When that happens, coaches have the responsibility to intervene, to defend the positive sports culture we want for our children. Some suggestions:

**Cue parents before games** Take time to remind parents before the game to Honor the Game.

*"Today's game is important for us, and we want to play our best. I want to remind you to Honor the Game today. I expect everyone associated with our team to act to make us proud of each other. If there is a bad call by the official, I want you to be silent. If there is a problem with the officiating, it's my job to address it, not yours. Your job is to fill the Emotional Tanks of our players and be a good role model for our kids. Everyone understand? Okay. Thanks."*

**Introduce Officials to Parent** If the situation allows, ask the officials if you can introduce them to your parents.

*"These are the officials for today's game. This is John Jordan and Heather Harris. They'll be making the calls today, and I know we all want to show them the respect they deserve. Let's give them a hand for being willing to do a tough job."* (Lead clapping.)

**Check in with Culture-Keeper** If you haven't already recruited a parent as "Culture-Keeper" to be your ally and promote sideline behavior that Honors the Game, do so as soon as you can. Always check in with your culture-keeper before a game.

*"Thanks for serving as the team's culture-keeper. I want everyone to Honor the Game today. Make sure to touch base with each parent early in the game. Say hello and feel free to remind them that we want to set an example for our kids to Honor the Game. Are you all set? Do you have any questions? Thanks again!"*

**Model the Behavior You Want to See** Parents pick up on your behavior. If you harp at officials, they'll be more likely to do the same. If you are calm and focused, it will be easier for them to act like you.

**Anticipate** When an official makes a "bad" call that favors your team, your parents are not likely to misbehave. If you think about it, you can usually anticipate situations in which parents are likely to become upset. For example,

- If a game determines which team goes on in the playoffs, expect parents to be more likely to lose control than in an early season game. You might even invite a board member or administrator to attend the game as a precaution.
- A close game is more likely to see misbehavior than a game decided early.
- A call against your team at the end of a game is more likely to attract jeers than one early in the game.
- If there is a perception that the other team is playing rough and the officials are not calling penalties, this is a combustible situation.

The bottom line: If a call upsets you, you can expect your parents to also be unhappy about it. That is a sign to monitor what's going on with your parents and fans on the sideline.

**Nip Problems in the Bud** The earlier you can respond to bad sideline behavior, the less likely it is to get out of control. Think of a match dropped in a dry forest. It's relatively easy to put out the fire when the match first drops. But a short time later, when the blaze has gotten going, it can be very difficult to put out.

At the first example of sideline misbehavior, even if it's reasonably mild, let your parents know that it's not okay.

*"Okay, cool it now. I don't want you to do anything that will distract or embarrass our players. I want you to Honor the Game"*

Sometimes just a look and a downward hand movement to "calm down" will do the job!

## Intervening on the Sidelines *continued*

**Refer to Higher Standard** People tend to respond to a higher authority or standard. You should remind them that the higher standard for your team is behavior that Honors the Game.

If your parents have signed the PCA Parent Pledge (or something comparable), then remind them of that.

*"Calm down. Remember that pledge you signed? You agreed to Honor the Game even when there is a bad call. This game is for the players, and you all agreed to set a good example for them."*

**Stay Calm** To paraphrase Rudyard Kipling: If you can keep your head while all around you others are losing theirs...you'll get better results. Getting upset at parents who are already upset may only add fuel to the fire. Be firm but calm. And if you can't be calm, then be as calm as you can be.

You just have to let people know their behavior is unacceptable. It can be as simple as saying, in a calm voice, "That's not okay. I want you to Honor the Game."

**Respect People's "Personal Space"** There is a zone of space around people called "personal space." Whenever someone invades another person's personal space without permission, it activates self-protection instincts and a situation can escalate. Be scrupulous about respecting other people's personal space. Avoid getting in someone's face while you are telling him or her to behave themselves. Stay at least arm's length away, and don't approach in what might be interpreted as a threatening manner. It will help nothing if a parent turns his or her anger, verbal or physical, on you.

**When Parents Are Upset with You** Sometimes it isn't the official who is the target of parent verbal abuse. If you become the target of one or more parents' unhappiness in a game, tell them, in as calm a way as you can,

*"This isn't the time to deal with this. I need to focus on the kids and the game right now. I'll talk with you when the game is over. Now I need you to calm down and let the kids play the game."*

**After the Moment** Later you may conclude that you need to have a follow-up conversation with one or more of the parents to make sure that things won't get out of hand again.

**Reinforce Good Behavior** People do what gets rewarded. A good way to stimulate good behavior is to recognize and reinforce good behavior when it happens. So make a point of thanking parents after every game in which they behave themselves.

*"Thank you for setting a good example today. We want to be known as a team that Honors the Game, and today you really did a good job of that. That makes my job easier and it allows the kids to focus on playing their best rather than having to worry about whether they are going to be embarrassed by their parents. Thank you."*

**Recognize the Challenge** Sometimes it can help to recognize the difficulty of what you are asking of parents. When a parent begins to yell at an official, you might say

*"No one ever said it was going to be easy to remain silent when the official makes a call that you don't like, but I know you can do it!"*

**What If You Don't Intervene Perfectly?** You don't have to be perfect. That is important enough that it bears repeating: You don't have to be perfect. You can stammer; the words can come out all wrong; you can be too subtle or too abrupt. That's okay. What's not okay is to let misbehavior go by without intervening.

You are the leader of the team. The team includes the players and their parents (and other fans). You need to intervene to let parents and fans on the sidelines know what is acceptable and what is not.

Don't worry about being perfect. Intervene as best you can. It doesn't matter so much how well you intervene. It does matter that you do it! So, do it.

**Be Willing to Ask for Help** Sometimes no matter what you do or how well you handle a situation, nothing helps.

Recognize when to step back and ask for help. If you feel you have done all you can to get parents to behave and it's still not working, call on the leaders of your organization to step in and help resolve the situation.