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## Civility needed in stands

By **Amy Donaldson**

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The sixth man. Every team longs for that loyal following, and any devoted fan likes to think of him or herself as part of the team.

Sometimes they can be.

Most athletes will tell you a rowdy crowd in their corner can energize them. A raucous group heckling them can also demoralize or distract them.

In high school sports, there are some issues, however, with just how a crowd chooses to support its team. The stated mission of high school sports is participation, and those in charge like to make sure everyone has a good experience. That means sportsmanship is more of an issue in high school sports than at any other level.

Principals on the Utah High School Activities Association's executive committee recently discussed whether they should ban newspapers at state tournaments because students were using them to hide their faces when the opposing teams' players were introduced. One principal made the comment that if they take newspapers away, students will just use programs or choose to turn their backs. The real issue, another said, is that administrators need to let their student bodies know that kind of action isn't good sportsmanship.

I completely agree that the problem isn't to get rid of newspapers, banners, air horns or anything else fans use to distract, discourage or demoralize players. It's to convince students that there is a more productive way to support their teams and show school spirit. Sportsmanship will not improve until individuals decide not to check civility at the ticket booth.

Everybody is used to hearing things like: "overrated," "airball!" or "check the scoreboard."

But at a game this year I heard chants from a crowd that insulted a player's ethnicity. I talked with the principal from the school whose crowd chanted the insults, and he confirmed what many other principals have told me this year. Sportsmanship, especially among fans, is getting worse.

He said that he had talked with his students about not yelling the kinds of things that were being chanted over and over at this student. When he confronted some students at one of the games, he was lambasted by a parent who accused him of not having any school spirit.

At another school in another classification, administrators were trying to find creative ways to deal with raging parents. The problem, he said, gets worse every year.

One principal said the behavior of parents is teaching children that they don't have to mind their manners or their mouths anywhere near an arena. They can insult authority figures and ignore the rules. The problem in policing bad sports in the stands is that officials can't call a foul on the sixth man and a coach can't bench parents.

I recently heard a father yell that an official should be shot. What is it about sports that makes us think we can say and do things we would be arrested for anywhere else? It's like the safety of the bleachers allows normally loving parents to turn into examples of rude, crude and shameful behavior.

At some of the games, it's so out of hand that administrators have turned into police officers, reprimanding the rude and ejecting the unruly.

"It's too bad," said one principal. "It's taken away from the game a lot. It's not fun for an administrator to go to a ball game anymore. You can't just go watch your students and support your kids. You have to be constantly vigilant."

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