NORDONIA MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS INITIATE SPORTSMANSHIP ACTIONS

As with many athletic administrators today, improving fan behavior and sportsmanship have become high priorities in event management. In many cases, these issues can have their inception points long before varsity-level school contests.

For Nordonia Middle School (Macedonia, OH) athletic director Rita Covin, inappropriate fan behavior towards officials and coaches had been escalating for several years. “In the fall of 2017,” stated Covin, “fan behavior was making middle school football games nearly unbearable. Our administrative team recognized the need to either address our challenges proactively or learn to deal with continuing problems as our sport seasons moved along.”

With the support of Nordonia Middle School Principal Bryan Seward and superintendent Joe Clark, Covin devised plans that mirrored similar Nordonia school district educational strategies. “In our school, we reward and recognize our students for doing positive things. We figured, if that action works for our kids, why not try it with our adults.”

After meeting with Nordonia Middle School seventh and eighth grade student leaders, a “Knights Sportsmanship Taskforce” (KST) was created. The group identified several action items that students would be directly responsible to organize and perform.

From these initial meetings, students were selected to be “ambassadors” for the Nordonia Middle School Knights and provided a t-shirt with “KST” emblazoned in green. The shirts made the students stand out and quickly became a coveted “uniform” for NMS students.

One of the group’s first acts was to create a “KST Citation.” These business card-sized tags were produced with the school logo and “KST” on one side with “You’ve been issued a citation for….. POSITIVE SPORTSMANSHIP” printed on the back side of the card. Group members handed out these cards to parents, coaches, students and officials when they displayed positive, sportsmanlike conduct before, during or after contests.

Students who demonstrated leadership qualities along with having outgoing personalities were chosen to be the “KST” representatives. One of the student leaders who has been involved for both years of the program is eighth grade Ryan Hall.

“Being a part of the KST group really made me much more aware of fan behavior,” stated Ryan. “It was something I hadn’t paid much attention to at games because I usually just sat and talked about all other things with my friends. The first time I really watched parents and adult fans, I was surprised to see the level of intensity and aggressiveness displayed by some fans.”

Ryan said he was happy to stay involved with the KST through the 2018-19 school year so he could continue to make a difference. He stated that one strategy he learned in his role was when he observed a fan displaying poor sportsmanship, he would typically go and give a card to a fan sitting next to the rowdy fan.

Midway through the first year, students suggested that a pre-game sportsmanship message be provided by the “KST” representatives via the public address system. These tasks were rotated among the students and were a positive way to set the tone for behavior and spirit expectations prior to each home contest.

The “KST” students welcomed contest officials upon their arrival to the game venue. They also created “thank-you” notes that were delivered to contest officials as part of their welcome.

“We could see a gradual change in our home contest culture during that first year,” stated Covin. “However, our current (second year) seasons have experienced even more positive change. Our now-eighth grade parents have already been exposed to our KST expectations and the students’ efforts are even more appreciated by all those involved at our home events.”

For Seward, there have been multiple positive outcomes from the KST initiative. “There has been a heightened sense of pride that these students demonstrate in promoting positive behaviors with both students and fans. It has also heightened the awareness on the part of parents that sportsmanship issues and behaviors don’t always align with what we say we value in education-based athletics. By emphasizing the concept that ‘we can do better,’ it creates the first step in changing those negative behaviors.”

Covin reflected upon the program’s impact after two years. “To be clear, most of our adults and students do the right things and reflect what we believe are positive behaviors. Like in any aspect of our school environment, students should be able to learn and play in an atmosphere that is fun, positive and encouraging. The spotlight should be on them and not on disruptive or out-of-line conduct. We have always maintained that expectation in our classrooms and education-based extracurricular opportunities should be no different.”

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