

Better ways to calm down coaches, parents, fans other than shaming, arresting? Maybe



[Laurence Reisman](#) | Treasure Coast Newspapers 12:52 p.m. EDT
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FHSAA calls for better behavior toward refs

The FHSAA has joined the NFHS in asking for less antagonism toward game officials. Video by Brian McCallum. Posted Jan. 29, 2018.

Wochit

[The recent incident leading to the arrest of a Vero Beach High School soccer dad](#) after a postgame incident was unfortunate. Indian River County sheriff's deputies said a parent slapped his daughter's coach's hand and sent his cellphone 40 feet over a fence and into the bleachers.

It's not unusual. But the incident at Vero Beach was trifling compared to many other cases found on the Internet related to fan (and sometimes coach) behavior.

A Google search makes you wonder why anyone would want to be a coach, referee [or umpire](#).

More: [Vero Beach soccer dad arrested, explains his side of story in battery case](#)

It's so bad that in early February, the [Florida High School Athletic Association](#) and [National Federation of State High School Associations](#) [sent a message to fans](#):

"Cool it."

In an open letter, the associations wrote that when parents become unruly, it "humiliates your child, annoys those sitting around you, embarrasses your child's school and is the primary reason Florida has an alarming shortage of high school officials."

Calvin Wright, the Brevard County-based [Mid-Coast Officials Association](#) commissioner for basketball referees, [told Florida Today](#) he has seen parents come onto the floor, shout in the faces of officials and spit in an athletic director's face.

"Fans are getting worse and worse, every year," Wright said. "It's progressively gotten so bad."

That's caused a massive shortage in quality officials in all sports. A survey by the [National Association of Sports Officials](#) found 75 percent

of referees who quit cite "adult behavior" as the primary cause, according to the open letter.

There were shocking scenes at Birmingham v. Aston Villa today as a pitch invader ran on and punched Aston Villa's Jack Grealish.

pic.twitter.com/a1YHcNKJfK

— NBC Sports Soccer (@NBCSportsSoccer) [March 10, 2019](#)

More: [Umpires hope altercation with coach wake-up call for others](#)

Just because you pay \$7 to get into your child's athletic event doesn't give you carte blanche to rip the refs, your coach or the other team's players.

Nor does paying \$100 to go to an NBA game give you the right to verbally abuse players. This past week [a fan was banned for life](#) from the Utah Jazz arena for berating Oklahoma City Thunder guard Russell Westbrook.

A Birmingham City soccer fan last week [learned an even tougher lesson](#). Running onto the pitch and tackling Aston Villa's captain netted the fan 14 days in jail.

What's expected in high school? Players and coaches who respect game officials. When the good ones quit, the only ones left will be awful, thick-skinned officials, or there won't be enough to play.

The same is true for coaches. Who wants to get paid what amounts to minimum wage to deal with players or parents who don't respect him or her?

What's needed are clearly communicated expectations for parents and coaches, who set the tone for players. Everyone needs to be on the same page.

More: [Amid controversy, Stutzke built innovative athletic program at Sebastian River](#)

[After my column last week](#) on the Vero Beach incident, in which I explained parent Anthony D'Elia faces a maximum prison term of five years for battering coach Dan Dickens, former Sebastian River High School [Athletic Director Michael Stutzke](#) emailed me.

"The current situation will run its course, but what about the future?" asked Stutzke, who created the Sharks athletic program and spent 22 years there. It wasn't all roses. Stutzke instituted hazing training for parents and teams after high-profile problems in the 2000s.

But Stutzke was on a mission to make high school athletics safe, fun and competitive.

[He created an athletic handbook](#), and posted it online, that outlines expectations. It's [similar to one at St. Edward's School](#) in Vero Beach. St. Edward's parents and athletes are required to sign a statement of understanding.

Stutzke also posted online and required parents to watch [one of the best videos](#) I've seen relating to parenting the student-athlete. The 2010 video made for Connecticut high schools features national sports commentators Suzy Kolber and Mike Golic. It should be required viewing, annually, for all parents of high school athletes.



Parenting the Student-Athlete

More: [Vero Beach High School athletics website](#)

More: [Sebastian River High School athletics website](#)

More: [St. Edward's School athletics handbook](#)

"It's difficult as a parent to cut the cord and relinquish your child's athletic development to another individual," Kolber says, citing youth and elite leagues that encourage parental involvement. "It's as if they are being nudged out of the nest and given an opportunity to fly on their own."

The video then shows several examples of how parents can, sometimes unbeknownst to them, act to harm their child.

One of the cardinal rules is not confronting the coach before or after a game. If there's an issue that requires parental involvement, it should be done by appointment only, and possibly include the athletic director.

Effective communication is key among parents, coaches, athletes and officials — in all directions.

So is holding stakeholders accountable, Stutzke said, citing several examples where parents violated rules and were banned from campus for a year. One was not allowed on campus to attend her child's graduation.

"It's a different ball of wax nowadays," Stutzke said. "Unless we get the parents behind it, it's really going to be a problem for spectator sports."

Could other strategies help encourage sportsmanship among fans?

How about having a school administrator sit with fans instead of watching from a distance?

I've seen that twice in the past year. Once at the Kentucky high school basketball championships, where Covington Catholic administrators sat with their young men; the other when referees at a high school soccer match ejected a parent, then asked an administrator to sit in the stands.

How about warning fans at the beginning of the game or season that unsportsmanlike conduct could lead to future attendance bans? Bans happen in professional and youth ranks. Why not high schools?

Coaches and players know they will be suspended for similar actions.

The Vero Beach incident should spur high schools to better communicate expectations. It should remind us free-speech rights come with responsibilities.

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