

Risk Research Bulletin

Managing Fan and Player Violence at Sporting Events

Each year, some United Educators (UE) member schools or colleges report the unfortunate news that a sporting event turned unruly, resulting in serious injuries to players or fans. Members describe a variety of disturbances, including chaotic behavior by students or visitors, expensive property damage, harmful publicity, and costly lawsuits. Recent claims have involved catastrophic injuries that occurred after fans rushed playing fields and tore down the goal posts following games. Others related to injuries athletes sustained when opposing players aggressively pushed or hit them during a game.

Melees have occurred at both men's and women's games in all sports, whether the home team is the victor or loser. The outcome of the disturbance can be devastating to injured players and fans, witnesses, and the institutions that face costly property damage, claims, lawsuits, and negative publicity.

Some commentators have criticized the culture of contemporary sports as one that tolerates poor behavior and abusive language from players, coaches and fans. By understanding the dangers of sporting event violence, taking preventive steps, and responding appropriately when incidents occur, institutions can help promote a positive culture and minimize the risk of disturbances, injury, and expense.



Types of Sports-related Violence

Sports-related violence assumes many different forms and has a variety of causes. Our focus here is on acts of aggression and disturbances at and after an athletic event involving the home and opposing teams, fans, and the campus facility that hosts the event.

On the playing field or court, some players and coaches use or encourage verbal abuse and physical intimidation or violence to injure and intimidate opponents. This tactic occurs mostly in sports known for heavy contact, such as football, ice hockey, and rugby, although it also appears in soccer, lacrosse, water polo, and basketball.

Sports fans may also get into the act by resorting to violence to scare opponents or to express loyalty to a team or anger at its performance. Riots or altercations may also be seen as a “tradition,” part of certain team rivalries or championship games.

Alcohol can be an important factor in precipitating or fueling crowd violence, as it lowers inhibitions and impairs thinking.



Educational institutions can act to protect fans and players before, during, and after athletic events and to reduce the risk of liability.

Legal Liability

Criminal law enforcement and civil legal actions may be used to hold players, fans, and others accountable when they engage in violence. In some cases, educational institutions may also be held liable for negligence for incidents and injuries arising out of sporting events. Two of the most common legal duties—to supervise players and to keep the premises reasonably safe—are described below.

- **Duty to supervise players.** Institutions, primarily through their coaching staff, have a duty to supervise players on their intercollegiate or interscholastic teams. While players may be deemed to assume certain risks of injury, educational institutions should take reasonable precautions to ensure that proper equipment is used, rules of fair play are enforced, and emergency medical treatment is available.
- **Duty to keep the premises reasonably safe.** As a general rule, an educational institution as a landowner has a duty to exercise reasonable care to keep its property in reasonably safe condition for its visitors. This duty may include the obligation to take precautions if it is foreseeable that a third party will commit a criminal or reckless act that causes injury to a sports patron or other person.

Numerous claims have been filed against UE members asserting a breach of these legal duties. Whether the institution is held liable, it may need to devote extensive time and resources to litigating or resolving the claim.

Prevention and Response

Educational institutions can act to protect fans and players before, during, and after athletic events and to reduce the risk of liability. Some strategies for managing player and fan violence follow. They include measures to promote appropriate behavior, prevent destructive acts, punish misconduct, and ensure effective responses should incidents occur.

Managing Behavior

Consider implementing the following steps to require appropriate behavior from athletic staff, players, and fans:

Coaches, Athletic Staff, and Players

- Describe your expectations for fair play and good behavior in coach and athletic staff job descriptions and discussions regarding employment.
- Describe your expectations for fair play and good behavior in student athlete handbooks and discuss during team meetings.
- Impose discipline and penalties for violations fairly and consistently regardless of a coach's win-loss record or a player's value to the team.
- Establish and enforce the rules of each sport and institutional policies pertaining to student-athlete behavior such as fighting or seeking to injure another player. Penalties should apply to the athletic activity, such as ejection from the game or suspensions from future games. Other stated consequences in a disciplinary policy may include counseling, loss of scholarship, leave, or expulsion from the institution.
- Address issues of fair play with coaches and athletic staff in required annual retreats or seminars with athletic administrators present. Provide professional development training on character-building and improving attitude and conduct.
- Reward coaches, staff, and players not only for wins but also for personal good behavior and fair play.
- Enlist coaches and players to participate in public service announcements that celebrate examples of good sportsmanship involving fans, athletic staff, and players at sporting events.

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Students and Other Fans

- Establish student codes of conduct and strictly enforce prohibitions on disruptive and destructive actions occurring before, during, or after competitive events. Specific prohibitions might include engaging in illegal assemblies and riots, disorderly conduct, failing to disperse, and hindering emergency efforts of police, fire, and medical personnel.
- Clearly and repeatedly communicate institutional policies and penalties regarding spectator aggression at athletic events. Include messages in written communications and email to season ticket-holders, the school newspaper, booster club magazines, and fan-based websites.
- Ensure that student groups hosting parties where alcohol is served comply with regulations concerning party and keg registration, open containers, training of alcohol servers, prohibition of underage drinking, the serving of food, and spot checks by campus police or security. Many institutions have banned tail-gating events on campus grounds.
- Review and strengthen, if necessary, campus policies and local laws on the serving and consumption of alcoholic beverages.
- Crack down on “nuisance parties” on and off campus that feature loud noise, alcohol, or substance abuse, and the gathering of large numbers of uninvited students and other individuals.
- Create a campus website or distribute information on how to maintain control of parties and describe local laws and penalties for disorderly conduct, excessive noise, and police response.
- Use the media to counteract the deleterious images created by prior instances of player and fan violence. Ask “star” athletes to tell their personal stories with messages about leadership, character, and nonviolence.

Athletic Event Management

The following strategies can be used to manage an athletic event:

Before the Game

- Convene officials with responsibility for athletics, students, police, and security to identify contests with the greatest potential for disruptions. Plan specific steps to discourage and respond to fan violence during these and other games.
- Appoint a high-ranking campus official as the institution's spokesperson to handle or coordinate media inquiries and interviews about sports-related violence and potential riots.
- Train event security, buildings and grounds, and maintenance staff on how to handle disruptive players or fans. Reward them for identifying problems and making suggestions to ensure safety at the event.
- Print ticket notices for sports with the greatest likelihood of fan injury, such as football, baseball, and hockey, indicating that the sport is inherently dangerous, that fans could be injured by flying balls or pucks or by people diving for them, and that spectators assume all risk of injury or harm.
- Station police officers in areas around campus where students tend to congregate to celebrate after games. Their presence before the event will deter students from assembling in those areas.
- If alcoholic beverages are permitted in tailgating areas, provide security and police patrols to control unruly behavior and ensure that the activities stay within designated places and times.
- Conduct a lottery for student seating in coveted areas of the arena or stadium. Student groups can place their names in the lottery only if they agree to occupy the seats and be role models for good conduct.

- Block seats behind the visiting team's bench or in the stands for the exclusive use of the visiting team. If possible, seat students in areas that do not allow easy access to the field or court.
- On football fields, raise the net behind the goal posts to prevent errant footballs from flying over it. In hockey arenas, install protective shields and netting to prevent pucks from flying into seating areas.
- Consider prohibiting use of signs made by spectators if such messages have caused disruptions in the past. Public institutions should check with legal counsel for guidance on any First Amendment implications.

During the Game

- Display banners or signs prominently in arenas and stadiums emphasizing standards of spectator behavior. Include similar information in game programs.
- Make a public announcement at the start of the game reminding fans of the standards of behavior.
- Announce at the beginning of football, hockey, and baseball games that balls or pucks may occasionally be kicked or hit into the seating areas. State that it is the fan's responsibility to give the object back, to stay seated, and not to dive for the ball or puck.
- Limit the number, type, and speed of action replays that may be shown on video boards during games if replaying questionable calls has caused fan disruptions. Use the video boards for entertainment purposes and to showcase good fan behavior.



- Establish a strong, visible police presence during sporting events, in addition to event security staff. Place undercover police officers in the stands to help deter skirmishes and to identify people who engage in misconduct.
- Police officers should have a communication system and predetermined routes (through and around the stadium, field house, etc.) that will allow for rapid convergence at specific locations when trouble is identified.
- Direct security staff to prominently videotape fans in the seating areas to help deter misconduct and provide identification in the event of fan violence.
- Encourage cheerleaders and bands to help dissuade or drown out negative cheers, heckling, and taunts with their own positive cheers and music.
- Eliminate serving alcoholic beverages at games or cut off sales during the games' second half. If alcohol is served, use trained servers to prevent underage drinking and public intoxication.

After the Game

- Hold fans accountable for their transgressions. Work with law enforcement to help identify and prosecute those who engage in criminal misconduct. Egregious behavior should lead to the loss of season ticket privileges.
- Cancel future sporting events or conference play in the event of severe or widespread misconduct or fighting, if the sporting event cannot be made reasonably safe.

Each institution should examine its culture, past experiences, and resources to prepare for sporting events. Institutions can help change a culture of poor behavior by emphasizing good sportsmanship, delivering positive messages from athletes and coaches, and effectively managing these contests. A comprehensive approach in managing player and fan conduct can also greatly reduce the likelihood and severity of injurious incidents and disruptions.



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