

NMAA looks to institute policy regarding interactions at sporting events

FARMINGTON – The New Mexico Activities Association revealed its plan for new guidelines regarding potential consequences toward unsportsmanlike behavior at high school sporting events.

Last week, during an NMAA board of directors meeting, one of the featured discussion items to be put on the table this spring is the “2 Strikes” rule, designed to stem the increase in bad behavior and language at sports events.

"I do think there's some bad apples out there," said Farmington High School girls basketball coach Tom Adair. "I don't know if it's simply restricted to one area or one particular fan base, but there's definitely an issue and I'm glad it's being addressed."

The NMAA's proposed new guidelines come just days after a brawl broke out in the final moments of a boys basketball game between Roswell and Carlsbad on Friday, Feb. 10. Video of the incident show Carlsbad's Damian Perez and two Roswell players chasing after a loose ball on the middle of the court as time ran out and a fight ensued between both teams.

The fight led to the suspensions of some fans and six student athletes, said Carlsbad Municipal Schools Superintendent Dr. Gerry Washburn.

More: [Carlsbad and Roswell High student athletes, fans suffer repercussions after basketball melee](#)

In other notable incidents regarding local teams and players, a girls basketball player from Bernalillo High School wrapped her arm around the neck of a Kirtland Central player in the final moments of the Class 4A state championship game last year at the Pit in Albuquerque before tossing her to the court.

The "2 Strikes" rule will essentially read as follows, based on the language from the NMAA:

"Any time an egregious act of unsportsmanlike conduct by a team participant, including a coach, occurs two or more times during the same season, at the same school, in the same activity, the team will be suspended from participation in that activity for the remainder of the season."

But the new proposal wouldn't just address players and coaches. Item 2 in this proposal specifically calls out fans and spectators who choose to put their voices out there in a negative fashion.

"Any time an egregious act of unsportsmanlike conduct by a non-team participant occurs two or more times during the same season, at the same school, in the same activity, the non-team member, along with all school spectators will be suspended from attendance in that activity for the remainder of the season."

In other words, according to the NMAA, actions have consequences and repercussions. So tread lightly.

During that same state basketball tournament in Albuquerque last year, fans of Espanola Valley's team were accused of throwing a water bottle at a Del Norte player during a game and then are also alleged to have used a paintball gun on Del Norte's bus.

"We have to send the message that it is not OK to act out, it is not OK to verbally abuse officials, it is not OK to fight, it is not OK to cuss at opponents," said NMAA executive director Sally Marquez. "We need to do better."

Several states have instituted similar guidelines as part of their high school sports associations.

The Oklahoma Secondary Schools Activity Association implemented a new "sportsmanship rule" last summer. With the new rule, teams can be suspended for the rest of the season after two reports of unsportsmanlike behavior.

Louisiana and Washington have also added versions of "2 Strikes," and many states, like New Mexico, are joining the fray. The New Mexico approach would differ only in the sense that both spectators and athletes are going to fall under the same category.

Marquez said hostile fans have been more of an issue of late than players or coaches being overly aggressive. As such, the NMAA does not want "to hurt kids for what's going on in the stands," Marquez said, adding that school administrations and officials must be active in policing their own fans.

"We're not consistent from one school to the next," Marquez said.

While there's no mention in the proposal as to who determines what equates to punishable behavior, the onus may likely fall onto game officials to make those calls.

"I think (the proposal) is a great idea," said Leonard Longhorn, who officiates a variety of prep and youth sports across San Juan County.

"The type of behavior we're told to look out for makes it very difficult to recruit newer or younger officials."

The "2 Strikes" initiative is expected to be put to a vote during the final NMAA board meeting of the school year, which is scheduled for June 1. Marquez said she expects it to be official policy when the 2023-24 school year begins.

Not all school's sports fans are the same, likewise not all sports participants are the same, and some athletic directors understand that there's a bigger narrative than just their own fanbase.

"I think our fans are great, but I do feel that harsh punishments need to be given when someone demonstrates egregious behavior," said Farmington Schools athletic director Isaac Gamboa. "We need to set the example of good behavior for our kids."

One of the main reasons bad behavior from fans has become such an intense issue is that it often targets athletes, primarily students. The parents of those athletes and administrators at these schools have been called into action and have demanded stiffer repercussions.

"I don't believe that what we are doing as far penalties for severe issue are harsh enough," said Bloomfield High School athletic director Ben Tensay. "Maybe we do need a harsher penalty to send a message that New Mexico schools that participate under the NMAA need to be held at a much higher standard."