



SPORTSMANSHIP

Behavior Modification

Coaches need to step in and curb the heckling that is creeping into junior tennis.

BY JOE TEDINO

During an Illinois high school tennis tournament last fall, I heard screaming and raced to the far end of the courts. A ninth-grader on the team I coach had just finished her first set and was in agony. Thoughts of a bee sting or ankle sprain flashed across my mind.

But she told me through tears that she had been serving for the set at 5-4 when a heckler outside the fence—her opponent's teammate, it turned out—questioned her line calls, forcing a replay of a critical point. To stop the heckling, I had the match moved to a court under the watchful eye of the tournament director, who let everyone know further outbursts wouldn't be tolerated. But the initial heckling changed the momentum and caused my

player to lose not just her composure, but also the set and, later, the match.

As a high school coach, I see many junior players facing the kind of belligerent, game-changing taunting that plagues youth soccer, football and many other sports. Bad language and bad manners have taken root in tennis.

Junior athletes deserve better behavior from spectators. And it's up to coaches and assistants to ensure that parents, siblings and teammates watch respectfully from the sidelines.

"The perfect sports parents would be ones you never hear from the sidelines," says two-time Olympic medalist Hannah Kearney, a freestyle skier who played soccer as a kid.

Parents of student-athletes are known to be a vocal and passionate group, and we want them to be engaged and

supportive as their children mature as players, students and citizens. But we shouldn't have to deal with overzealous spectators who can be quick to sound off.

What are coaches supposed to do? To start, meet with parents and players at the beginning of the season and let them know what you expect at practice, on the courts and from the sidelines. Talking openly about expectations is good for the game and helps students have the right mental framework to do their best.

Also, refer to the USTA rulebook, which covers a range of behavioral issues. For one thing, the rules state clearly that spectators "never make line calls." Besides that, it notes that parents, grandparents, siblings and teammates are duty-bound "to encourage and maintain high standards of proper conduct, fair play and good sportsmanship."

Col. Nick Powell, who became chairman of the USTA's rules committee in the 1970s, produced a list of behaviors that became known as "The Code." The first principle is that tennis requires cooperation and courtesy.

Coaches can help parents and fans apply The Code by clearly setting expectations for their behavior:

- Respect and acknowledge the integrity of the officials, which at many high school matches are the coaches.
- Keep comments respectful—vocal only between points—and allow those on the court to make the calls without interference, interjection or instigation.
- Display positive behavior in person and on social media.

Play Like a Champion, the educational resource for school coaches, encourages parents to be "respectful guests" at athletic competitions. "The game belongs to the kids," it says, "and the game can go on without the spectators."



Joe Tedino, a retired public relations executive and PTR-certified instructor, coaches the boys' and girls' teams at St. Ignatius College Prep, a catholic high school in Chicago.