Sports rivalries can energize school spirit. But keeping events respectful takes a dynamic blend of foresight, leadership and buy-in from the community.

BY SEAN MCCOLLUM  ILLUSTRATION BY DANIEL FISHEL

In autumn 2010, two New Jersey high schools prepared to renew an old rivalry on the football field. Located in neighboring townships, Madison High School and Chatham High School have enjoyed a spirited competition for decades.

At times, though, the competition had threatened to get a bit out of hand. A few years earlier, says Madison High’s athletic director, Sean Dowling, some Madison High “knuckleheads” had spray-painted graffiti on Chatham’s buses and vandalized its football field. Dowling had always made a point of emphasizing sports ethics and was not overly worried about trouble in the lead-up to the big game now. Still, he and Harvey Cohen, Chatham High’s athletic director and Dowling’s good friend, recognized a teachable moment when they saw one.

The two schools organized a “Sportsmanship Summit”—a Friday morning conference at Chatham. The schools’ student leaders—captains from the various sports plus student council representatives—shared breakfast and brainstormed ideas on energizing their fans but keeping the rivalry in bounds. “I think the kids probably thought [the summit] was overkill on our part,” Dowling says. But from his years of experience, he knew it was always easier to stay out of trouble than get out of trouble.

The following Friday night, the two football teams lined up across the field from each other. The players then strode to the center and exchanged pre-game handshakes and “good game” fist bumps. Fans of both teams cheered and clapped. “It looked awesome,” Dowling says. “And it set the tone, not so much for the players, but for the students and the parents in the stands.” And that tone has continued to this day.

For athletes and fans, great rivalries represent sports at their most dramatic. These contests and the histories behind them can inspire the best in athletes and teams, and bring together communities in shared enthusiasm like few other public events can. This is shown in venues large and small, from the national pride demonstrated during the Olympic Games to the community spirit on display when entire small towns turn out to see their high school teams compete.

But when fans lose perspective on the purpose and relative importance of sports, rivalries turn rotten. At the interscholastic level, that rot can spread into the school community itself. When marred by vandalism, insulting chants, threats and violence—in the name of team spirit—competition threatens to wreck the finest sports have to offer. It can take forms that poison the overall climate of a league or school, creating an atmosphere where harassment and bullying may be ignored or overlooked.

Sports and School Climate
An example of the ugly side of high school sports occurred in fall 2010. Two rival Ohio high schools were filmed exchanging chants of “Powder Blue Faggots” and “Halloween Homos”—referencing school colors—before a football game. The taunts, something of a tradition in the rivalry, overlapped with several teen suicides in the area, attributed by some to anti-gay attitudes at area schools.

“It goes on all the time,” Jan Cline, then the executive director of the LGBT Community Center of Greater Cleveland, told The Plain Dealer after footage of the event appeared on YouTube. “As a teenager I heard it at school,” he said. “The school has to be responsible for what happened on their grounds. I understand this has been part of a long tradition and that the kids don’t even understand what they did wrong.”

“It’s bullying,” Cline continued. “The unintended impact of this is that it drives young men and women to kill themselves. It sets them apart. What happened at the game tells people that it’s OK to say anti-gay slurs because these people are not worth much.”

How can schools keep such incidents from taking place? Or better yet, foster a culture where the community coaches itself into respecting the differences of others, including opponents?

There are no one-policy-fits-all answers to these questions, for better or worse. Creating a respectful community usually necessitates a vexing

**Sportsmanship** *(spôrts- mâⁿ-ship)*, *n*  Conduct becoming to one participating in a sport, e.g., fairness, respect for one’s opponent, graciousness in winning or losing.
balancing act between cracking down on the worst behaviors and making efforts to raise awareness and promote more positive participation.

Kind of like tough, contentious issues in real life, suggests Jim Thompson. Thompson is the founder and president of Positive Coaching Alliance, a national nonprofit organization that works to improve sports culture among coaches and young athletes. “We need to see [poor sports ethics] not as a problem but as a challenge and part of the educational mission,” Thompson says. “There can be an incredible opportunity for a school community to redefine itself using sports as the vehicle. And it can be especially meaningful to the kids when they are given a chance to take ownership of the process.”

**Youth Sports in a Sports-Obsessed World**

Thompson puts much of the onus for bad behavior surrounding youth sports on our sports-obsessed culture. “The world has never been so saturated with sports as it is now,” he says. He cites the rise of ESPN and 24/7 sports coverage as both a symptom and a driver of that obsession, culminating in a culture that glorifies winning and laughs off coaches’ tantrums, players’ ugly behavior and fans’ misconduct. Vicious put-downs and “smack talk” are the language of message boards and sports radio talk shows. Thompson believes these attitudes and behaviors inevitably trickle down to coaches, players and fans at the interscholastic level.

Sister Lynn Winsor agrees. Winsor serves as vice principal for activities and athletic director at Xavier College Preparatory, an all-girls school in Phoenix. A long-time coach and past president of the National Interscholastic Athletic Administrators Association, she says she has observed respectful fan behavior decline in nearly 40 years of playing, coaching and overseeing sports. “With so much TV coverage, what young people see going on at the pro and college level now drops right down to high school,” she says. “[Students] mock or imitate it. And the local athletic director is the one who has to deal with it.”

And deal with it the athletic director must, Winsor adds. The trick, she says, is to confront the behavior at a level appropriate to the situation. Overreaction can generate its own problems, including festering resentment and running feuds; but if interventions are too unclear or inconsistent, the challenges to authority will likely ramp up.

“I’ve had to ask fans to leave basketball games for yelling at the referees,” Winsor says. But she also tells the story of informing an unruly parent that he could attend soccer games only if he sat next to Sister Joanie, a devoted Xavier fan but also a stickler for proper behavior. “He told me afterward that he had a much better experience cheering and watching the game with Sister Joanie,” Winsor laughs. “You have to be ready to come up with creative answers to handle different situations.”

**Cracking Down Versus Buying In**

Sports rivalries are dynamic relationships with many moving parts—athletes, coaches, students, pep squads, parents and others. When it’s healthy, fierce competition can engender respect as well as passion. Whatever antagonism exists is balanced by awareness that the two opponents need each other.

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**HUMANIZING SPIRIT DAYS AND PEP RALLIES**

While spirit days and pep rallies can energize a school and the student body, they can fray the nerves of educators and infuse the student body with negative messages. Consider:

- Cheerleaders at a Texas high school pretended to gun down other cheerleaders dressed in rival school colors.
- A white junior at a Utah high school, dressed in the class color of white for the annual “spirit bowl,” covered his head in a KKK-like hood and allegedly taunted a mixed-race classmate.
- A Minnesota school district was sued by the family of a distressed black student for not blocking an unofficial spirit event known as “Wigger Wednesday,” when white students dressed up in caricatures of African-American fashion.
- The seemingly ubiquitous cross-dressing male athletes who sport huge rubber-ball breasts.

Helping kids and teens develop tolerance and sensitivity toward others is rarely an easy task. This can be especially true in communities with limited exposure to people of other backgrounds and ethnicities. In the unkind or naïve hands of young minds, intentions can wander off into the weeds of bad judgment and bigotry.

Heavy-handed censorship is rarely the best answer. It can cause students to sweep unexamined attitudes under the rug of teacher-approved behavior. Instead, savvy club advisers can offer adult reflection and guidance to student groups about the appropriateness of their skits or other public displays of school spirit.

One insightful exercise is to ask students to research rivalry—gone—wrong events like those noted above. As a group, they can analyze why these incidents generated so much controversy. Stimulate students’ critical thinking skills as well as compassion with this question: “Does our idea single out people and portray their identity—race, religion, class, gender, intellectual ability or sexuality—as inferior or laughable?”

If the answer is yes, or even maybe, then students should be urged to go back to the drawing board.
other as integral halves in the contest.

Demonization of the other side, though, is a sign the rivalry may be tilting toward something uglier, says PCA’s Thompson. “When there is name-calling and taunting, it can very quickly lead to physical strife,” he says. Students posting signs threatening mock violence against the other school, the vandalizing of school property, fans booing when the visiting team is introduced or cheering when an opposing player is injured—all can be warning signs that the rivalry may be coming off the rails.

When this happens, school officials can manage the conflict—existing or potential—with one of two general strategies, says Thompson: the crackdown model and the ownership model.

The crackdown model follows traditional lines of authority. Codes of conduct are explicitly stated and punishments for violations are clear-cut—ejection from the game, loss of privileges, suspension, even arrest for criminal acts like vandalism or assault.

The ownership model requires more forethought and commitment. It seeks to empower students, staff and parents by giving them integral roles in planning for and running rivalry-related events. “What about getting a cross-section of the student body—working with the athletic director, coaching staff and Parent Booster Club—to start planning for next year’s big games?” Thompson asks. “Form a working group to determine what needs to be done. Have them ask, ‘What kind of culture do we want to have at our games?’ and identify potential problems and how to defuse them.”

When safety is at issue, then some cracking down may very well be necessary, Thompson acknowledges. But the ownership model fosters buy-in that can reduce tensions and conflict long-term, and it requires less top-down intervention.

When working to rebuild or recast a rivalry that has turned ugly, Thompson proposes structured events to bring together counterparts of the rival schools, like the “Sportsmanship Summit” organized by Madison and Chatham high schools. These interschool meetings might include nontraditional student leaders, if possible, he says. Few things can humanize a rival more than trading stories away from the court, field or diamond.

“It may seem like a lot of work, but talk about a teachable moment,” Thompson says. Again, he sees such efforts as part of the educational mission. “It can be a fantastic leadership and learning experience for all involved, especially for the students.”

If necessary and possible, Thompson recommends getting more explicit in pushing back against a distorted “us versus them” mentality. He describes what he calls “A Rivalry to Be Proud Of” campaign, jointly promoted by the rival schools. “You might have buttons and T-shirts made up with both school colors and that slogan,” he says. “The captains of the two teams might create a public service announcement together describing what the rivalry means to them.” He suggests efforts to welcome opponents as “guests” rather than “visitors,” with principals, coaches, pep squads and players prepared to serve as role models of enthusiastic but respectful behavior for the home-team fans.

Sports and School Climate
Richard Cardillo, education director of the National School Climate Center, believes it is important to evaluate the health of the overall school climate when determining how much crackdown and how much buy-in is needed or workable for a given situation. However, he contends that punishment for broken conduct codes, in and of itself, rarely gets at the underlying attitudes or behaviors that lead to incidents. In the buy-in approach, “It’s not that you broke a rule, it’s that you damaged a relationship,” he says—a relationship with classmates, the school community, even the rival school. The emphasis is then on repairing the relationship that was damaged, not just weathering a visit to the principal’s office, a suspension or an embarrassing article in the local paper.

In Cardillo’s view, developing pride in a positive, tolerant, classy school climate can become a rallying point for all students and staff. And school sports can be a big player in the campaign.

“I’m a big fan of pep rallies” as well as sports, Cardillo says. “It helps unify us around something.” What that something will be, he notes, is an important question for every school to consider and answer for itself. That requires an honest inventory of potential problems, discussion of the values that students, student athletes, faculty and staff want the school to represent, identification of positive behaviors that embody those ideals and finally active promotion of those behaviors and ideals.

Staff, teachers and administrators need to walk the talk in creating that healthier learning and living environment, Cardillo insists. “Students aren’t dumb. They figure out very quickly the pecking order among teachers, and who the administrator is that everyone is afraid of.”

For sports in a school with a healthy climate, pride can be less about winning and more about representing a vibrant, can-do community where everyone’s place and participation is respected. School unity is valued, defended and celebrated, in sports and elsewhere. In all things, winning is secondary to effort and honorable behavior, and triumph is not based on the defeat or humiliation of another or the other side.

In Cardillo’s experience, school communities with a healthy climate become better at self-regulation. Students themselves will step up to interrupt cruelty and crass behavior before it gets out of hand, whether in hallways or the bleachers. “They’ll tell others, ‘We don’t do that here. This is the way we do things at our school.’”