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Longtime NASO contributor Don Collins, a San Francisco lawyer and sports official recently served as a panelist for a conference on ethics in sports. Developed by Character Counts Sports, a branch of the Josephson Institute of Ethics, the conference included individuals from all areas of sport, from, players, coaches and officials to administrators and media.

Can We Put Sportsmanship Back in the Game?

By Donald C. Collins

Character Counts Sports held a one-day conference at Stanford University on August 8th, entitled "Pursuing Victory with Honor." Stanford University and the California Interscholastic Federation (CIF), the governing body for California high school sports sponsored the one-day conference. Panelists included athletic administrators, coaches and sports officials, including myself and NASO president Barry Mano

If you're unfamiliar with Character Counts Sports, let me briefly provide some background: Character Counts Sports is a project of the Josephson Institute of Ethics. Headed by Michael Josephson, one of the nation's leading ethicists, the institute works with existing organizations to further its mission of improving the ethical quality of society. The Institute works with organizations and individuals to define broad ethical policy objectives, to examine the ethical framework of a community (in our case, the sports community), to assist people within the community in developing a paradigm within which to examine the ethics of their own decision making and finally to assist organizations in developing models to teach, display and reward ethical conduct within their own organizations.

The Josephson Institute has had a profound impact on improving the ethical quality of life in numerous business settings; it has also reduced student misconduct through its work with Albuquerque public schools. The institute concentrates on athletics through Character Counts Sports.

Clearly many of the problems in sports reflect a failing of character. The list of sports-related incidents in which poor character is displayed is too long to repeat here, but just in the last few months we have heard of a parent who beat another parent to death at a hockey practice and a youth baseball coach who went home, changed into his police uniform and arrested an umpire on a trumped up driving charge in retaliation for the officer's ejection from his son's youth baseball game. We read about out-of-control parents routinely in our newspapers, and readers of NASO publications are exposed on a regular basis to the monthly roll call of sports officials who are the victims of batteries perpetrated by angry participants and spectators.

The conference participants obviously want to make the sports culture more ethical. Youth basketball coach George Adkins said, "I have a problem with the high emphasis on winning at any cost."

The conference participants' very presence reflects their good intentions, but those good intentions create the very real danger that Josephson will end up preaching to the choir, resulting in feel-good rhetoric and allowing everyone at a Josephson Institute conference to leave feeling good about themselves and attributing responsibility to others. Character Counts Sports avoids that trap.

Character Counts Sports works with groups to define an ethical model. It then forces groups and individuals to apply that model to their own decision-making. That is a challenging and not always pleasant experience, especially when it is played out in a public setting. Indeed, players, coaches and administrators who have been exposed to Josephson and Character Counts have had to reflect on their actions. For example, a professional basketball player was stunned to realize that a Character Counts audience considered it unethical for her to try to deceive officials by going to the free throw line after one of her teammates was fouled.

Most people who work with Josephson would likely agree that the challenges he puts forth are necessary and ultimately rewarding. Josephson points out that most everyone agrees upon and can envision successful sports plays; thus, we can teach them, apply them and recognize them. Similarly, once people can envision an ethical model of conduct they can apply it within the sports culture.

A number of sports sponsors working in conjunction with Character Counts have created the Arizona Sports Summit Accord. The Accord sets out 16 principles that form the foundation of an ethical sports culture. The 16 principles are applicable to any entity involved in sports. Josephson says, "The Arizona Sports Summit Accord is the basic document that is underlying this whole initiative called 'Pursuing Victory with Honor.'" The Arizona Sports Summit Accord has been adopted by colleges, high school governing bodies, the YMCA of the USA and NASO.

The Arizona Accord is ethical policy. Organizations must take measures to ensure that the policies permeate the sports culture. CIF Executive Director Jack Hayes says, "We believe the 16 principles are an accurate statement of what should be right about athletics." Mr. Hayes says the CIF will enact rules, create rewards, educate student-athletes, coaches and administrators and create incentives to apply the principles throughout his organization.

Officials certainly were not forgotten. The conference participants were concerned with the treatment of officials. Tom Crawford, the former director of the United States Olympic Committee's Coaching Division said, "Coaches need to respect officials and recognize that they are an integral part of every sport... I think it's the mutual respect between officials and coaches that is probably the most important thing."

At the same time, officials exposed to Josephson at Character Counts conferences around the nation and at the NASO convention last June have benefited from the exposure. We have been forced to explore the ethical ramifications of our actions, whether those actions are the intentional misapplication of a rule in order to send a message to a player or coach or the failure to apply a conduct rule because it is convenient to do so.

Character Counts Sports will continue holding conferences throughout the country. The effects will likely be felt as groups ranging from the NCAA and high school federations to local officiating associations. Some state high school associations and other sports administrative groups have already begun implementing those measures. Those groups already cite anecdotal evidence of improvement. Time will tell whether these measures result in a better sports community and in better treatment of sports officials.

(Don Collins is a longtime official and lawyer from San Francisco.)

Sidebar:

For more information on how your association can learn more or become involved with Character Counts Sports, please go to their website at www.charactercounts.org, e-mail CC@jiethics.org or call 310/306-1868.