

# School Sports Brawls Alarm Parents, Officials / Four violent confrontations in Bay Area in five months

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Published 4:00 am, Monday, February 15, 1999

High school athletic events -- intended to be constructive and fun -- have taken an increasingly ugly turn toward beatings and racial incidents this past year in the Bay Area.

When a gang of toughs beat up an 18-year-old spectator after a basketball game between rival San Francisco Catholic schools last week, it was only the latest in a frightening string of such incidents in Novato, San Francisco, Danville, Oakland and Brentwood.

High school athletic directors are quick to point out that such incidents are rare among the hundreds of sporting events daily at Bay Area campuses. They say most school districts go for years without a violent incident.

Yet they all expressed alarm -- even bewilderment -- at the increasing regularity of violent events: Four brawls have taken place since September. Not every incident involved students, but each happened at a school-sponsored sports event.

"I wish I knew what was happening," said [Jerry Luzar](#), [Oakland Athletic League](#) commissioner. "In high school athletics, there have always been tensions between competitors from rival schools. It does seem that in recent years, it's more likely those tensions will be acted out in a negative way."

Don Collins, president of the [Northern California Basketball Officials Association](#), called it a "new wave of violence and vileness.

"We're talking about people who are fans, parents, friends -- the people least exposed to a coach who stresses sportsmanship," he said. "They don't realize there's a need for them, too, to embody the high ideals of athletic sports programs."

[Alexandra Matteucci](#), whose 17-year-old son, Joseph, was killed in 1993 during a racial melee at a [Castro Valley Little League](#) game, is disheartened by the recent wave of violent episodes. Since her son's death, she has collected more than 50 newspaper clippings about beatings, fights and violent outbreaks at athletic events.

"I get a knot in the pit of my stomach," she said. "To lose a child to something so senseless is a lesson I would think we would have learned. But it is continuing."

Matteucci also founded the [Joseph Matteucci Foundation](#) for Youth Non-Violence, in Castro Valley. Each year, she meets with 7,000 athletes, parents and coaches in community youth athletic leagues to work on ways to prevent such tragedies. This year, she expanded the program to three high schools in Castro Valley and San Lorenzo, offering anger- and frustration-management classes.

She also started a conflict-resolution program, which has trained 450 students in 26 schools this year.

Matteucci is not alone in her zealousness to fight the fighting.

Two of the five recent incidents took place in Contra Costa County, prompting at least a dozen high schools to begin separating fans with physical barriers, strengthening conduct codes and adding security officers and police to patrol games.

But it took violence to make it happen. In one incident in January, four men arrived at a Liberty High basketball game in Brentwood looking for girls, police said. When confronted by visiting Pinole Valley High School students, the men brandished a metal bar. Police used pepper spray to quell the melee among students and more than two dozen fans.

In September, at least six San Ramon Valley High School students savagely beat a visiting Walnut Creek student during a football game at the [Danville school](#).

One subtle thing that Bay Area high school principals and athletic directors agree has been missing from many sports events could turn out to be the most important help of all: telling players and spectators what the rules are.

"What we are doing is becoming more aware of what is on the books and reminding people," said [Dee Hopfenspirger](#), principal of [Deer Valley High School](#) in Antioch. "When it comes to spectators, they are held to the same standards as athletes."

Consequently, many schools now read a rules statement before each game, a document also printed in game programs and school newsletters.

Previous attempts to stem racial incidents at [San Marin High School](#) in Novato -- including schoolwide "days of respect" -- may have helped some students learn sensitivity. But they did not stop at least one white student from shouting racial slurs at visiting black basketball players from [Tamalpais High School](#).

Although that incident did not turn violent, it was the sort of ugliness that educators know can escalate quickly.

"Bad things are going to happen occasionally," said Assistant Principal [Candace Curtis](#). "We just have to keep plugging away."

Other school administrators say that while every incident cannot be prevented, there are a number of effective strategies for reducing violent or ugly incidents.

San Francisco public schools have had almost no violence at their games in several years.

"I truly considered eliminating soccer when I first got here because it was so violent," said [Ann Heinline](#), who has been athletic director for 15 years. "Spectators were as bad as players. And we went through a spate of suspended football games due to fights on the field."

But Heinline has strengthened rules of conduct beyond what national regulations require.

"We've coined the phrase 'preventative officiating,' " she said. As soon as players begin to taunt or use elbows in aggressive play, the game stops. The head coach issues a warning. If the incident recurs, the player is ejected or given a personal foul. The player must then sit out four plays.

"This works for us," Heinline said. "And if a player or a coach is ejected for unsportsmanlike behavior, that person has to sit out the next game. The coach can't coach, and the player can't play."

San Francisco schools have also hired an East Bay firm to teach principals, security guards and even cheerleaders how to have violence-free events. In San Francisco and Oakland, the schools work closely with police and schedule games in the afternoon rather than at night.

In Oakland, where coaches participated in a violent incident in November, athletic commissioner Luzar said he is concerned that high school coaches increasingly are part-timers without much association with the school. "It's harder to supervise them. These walk-on coaches are not as connected to the school program," he said.

[Elgie Bellizio](#), commissioner for 22 schools in the [Monterey Bay League](#) and [Mission Trail Athletic League](#), said tough rules and consistency in meting out punishment are the keys to curbing violence during and after sporting events. For Bellizio, there are no warnings.

If something unsportsmanlike happens, a student sits out the game. A second time, and the student is kicked off the team. This season, several students have been benched, and six may not play for the rest of the year because of overly aggressive, inappropriate conduct, Bellizio said.

For two years, his commission has hosted a "sportsmanship conference" for teachers, cheerleaders, school staff members, athletes and parents. They "role-play" and learn how to defuse volatile scenarios. At the end of the half-day session, groups come up with goals for the next season. Example goals include passing out sportsmanship flyers and holding preseason meetings for parents.

Talking to kids about violence is one thing, but Bellizio's commission makes it a strict rule that an adult, besides the coach, must attend all games. That is the person who will be held

accountable if something goes wrong. Currently, Bellizio is figuring out how to discipline an adult who did not show up at a recent game.

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