

Christian Sportsmanship Liaison

What Is It?

Each team must designate a parent/guardian as Christian Sportsmanship Liaison for its team. This role may be filled by 1-3 people to provide some latitude to parents who may have other commitments.

Who Chooses the Liaison?

Practically speaking, the coach of the team is responsible for choosing this person. (The parish representative or pastor would have ultimate say if there were ever an issue.)

Rationale

Study after study and news story after news story points to bad behavior at youth sporting events. Our league is not immune from this behavior and sadly it most often comes from the stands. A significant challenge that we face as a society is that we keep punting things to other people to address. We all listen in horror and disbelief to stories about the bystander effect when someone is brutalized in the midst of a crowd and no one steps in. **Silence speaks volumes.**

Yet we've all been guilty of watching something in sports that is breaking a rule or saying something damaging for kids to hear or see and not stepping in. In sports leagues that has become: "oh, crummy behavior is for the refs to take care of or for the Acting Commissioner to take care of" rather than people saying, "hey, I've got to police my own behavior" or "I know John and can talk him down a few levels." Or, we think "hey, I guess since my friend sitting next to me in the stands isn't correcting me, it's okay for me to be inappropriate or obnoxious." The hope is to ask people to encourage their friends within their own team community to be better behaved instead of having someone who doesn't know them make the request.

It's better for a friend or fellow parishioner who they know from their parish to say, "oh hey, you might not know it but drinks are not allowed" or "hey, let's cheer positively, we're not allowed to talk to the refs" or "hey, Jim, can you grab your kids, they aren't supposed to be playing on the stage..." It's far less confrontational and much more collegial to hear correction from a friend and it changes the equation from being an "us versus the machine (ref/AC)" to a "hey, we're watching out for each other in a good and supportive way to abide by the rules and to be good role models for our kids."

Unfortunately those folks who ignore the rules are often more than happy to give a sneer or show feigned ignorance to an Acting Commissioner they'll never see again who reminds them of the rule. Having a liaison is intended to make things less confrontational, more collegial, in that you know the people involved, and make the team more responsible for its overall behavior. There's also an element of positive peer pressure here.

While the team's coach is ultimately responsible and has the greatest immediate ability to sanction their parents in the stands, the liaison can help so that it may never rise to that level—and if it does, to let the coach know, especially if there are any consistent issues with specific people.

The entire idea of this is that it NOT become confrontational (as some AC experiences do). These folks will be advised NOT to let it get confrontational, rather if it is heading in that direction after they have politely said something to a friend (or passed them a St. John the Silent prayer card)... to simply report it to the AC AND the coach and ask the coach to address either on the spot or after the game if it's something that can wait. It doesn't take too many game stoppages before a poorly behaved parent gets the idea that he/she is preventing their son/daughter from playing because they have something in the gym they know they shouldn't or because they are behaving in a way they've agreed not to.

Maybe this small step will give us all a bit more ownership and help us take pride in our community and assist those closest to us to grow closer to what Christ is asking of us all to achieve through this league. Perhaps this liaison will help us take small steps individually to change culture and to help us understand that *it can sometimes be un-Christian when we do NOT say something when we should*. Encouraging folks to have that voice can have positive and lasting impact.

How Much Effort Will It Take for the Liaison?

To be clear, if your team's parents/guardians are behaving as everyone in the league has agreed to in writing and after videos and parent meetings then this should be ZERO work for the liaison. The parent should be able to sit back and enjoy the game just like everybody else. So, if there's no problem on your team sidelines then it shouldn't be an issue other than the liaison coordinating with the other liaison for your team who will attend a given game. The coach should send out an email before the first game indicating who the coach has chosen as the liaison(s). In that email it would be good to indicate the coach's full support for the person and indicating that it would be inappropriate and reflect badly on a parent and the team if the coach were to hear something from the liaison. The coach could also indicate that it would be incredibly unfair to put a liaison in an awkward spot, so please do not do so.

Ideally, the soft positive peer pressure will make this role a non-issue on most teams. If on the other hand a parish's teams have issues then perhaps this is a good way for the coach and parish leaders to understand and quickly address any issues they might have.

Type of Person/Qualifications

A person with good character and sportsmanship; a non-confrontational person. This person is NOT an enforcer. Because this person has no responsibility for children and no substantial contact this person does not need to be OPCYP/VIRTUS compliant (unless that is required due to another role they serve). Will it be difficult to find someone? This person does not have to assume responsibility outside of the game—most people actually want to be at the games (and not work the clock!) so, it's not an additional time commitment (as opposed to the ACs who not only have to coach but also set aside another hour to watch a game where they know no one.) The important part of this is that if we want to have good behavior and Christian interaction—things that are so important if we want this to be a league different than others—then people need to take ownership and contribute their efforts to make it happen.

Responsibilities of Liaison

- Get to know parents/guardians on your team and build a relationship with each of them so that it's easier to make suggestions during the season
- Emphasize the positive—set the tone through your own behavior and positive cheering.
- Develop ideas to encourage patience that may get your message across without ever saying a word (St. John the Silent prayer cards, a rosary, a trinket that helps people remember, an article about youth sports...the positive hope for it)
- Re-read and understand the NVJCYO code of conduct (the positives...and the negatives such as: no gestures or interaction or questioning of refs or game officials; no interaction with the table/book/clock; no children unsupervised or playing on the stages; no food or drink)
- Sit in a place where you can hear most of the parents from your team
- Speak ONLY to parents/guardians of your team

- You may choose, at your discretion and with the coach's blessing, to share articles about sportsmanship and Christian virtue with the parents (and with the coach to share with players)
- You may choose, at your discretion and with the coach's blessing, to propose activities outside of the games to participate in (e.g., Christian service project, Catholic faith or formation event, etc.)
- Please try to introduce yourself prior to the game to the Christian Sportsmanship Liaison from the other team. (We are attempting to get identifying tags but that may not happen this year.)

What Liaison Should Not Do

- Never be confrontational...if your first request goes unheard then report it to the coach for the coach to address
- You have no part in the game or the rules of the game or the officiating or the score.
- You should NOT interact with parents/guardians/players from other team or their stands— unless of course you are simply introducing yourself to their liaison or welcoming people to your parish's gym. Your role is NOT to help the other team understand good behavior.
- You should not interact with the referees at all.
- You should not interact with the coach(es) from the other team at all.
- The Acting Commissioner has the ultimate say about behavior...you should not argue with the Acting Commissioner. If there is an issue regarding this, discuss it after the game. You are NOT an advocate for your parents during the game.

The successive lines of reinforcement for building a positive culture look something like this:

- Families discuss expectations for their own behavior amongst themselves and pray for patience, charitable hearts, great sportsmanship, and an eagerness to build up each child on the team and in the program.
- Parish sets its expectations for behavior (expectations that hopefully go above and beyond what the league expects) and sets the tone for what it wants to get out of participation.
- The coach sets tone and team expectations, including about parent behavior, perhaps above and beyond parish and league expectations.
- The liaison is the collegial voice who tries to make sure that nothing ever rises to the attention of the Acting Commissioner who also has to be busy watching the game and has a tough time hearing things from anyone that might be more than a few people away from him/her.
- The Acting Commissioner addresses behavior that hasn't been controlled and acts as impartial observer and reporter regarding game circumstances as well as poor spectator behavior or damage, etc.
- The ref controls the rules of the game, the coaches and the players, and if needed they can address fans/stands and stop game...but by the time it gets to them it's often too late to change the tone in the stands. The coaches are on opposite sides of the court often so they can't even hear what's happening in the stands and the AC often can't either.