

STUDENTS, PARENTS, POLITICS AND ATHLETIC PROGRAMS

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Although this may seem, at first glance, a strange topic each of us fits somewhere within it. By attending this conference we all show ourselves to be students; and no doubt a majority of those here are also parents. A few of us are politicians either with associations, local governments or school boards like myself; and we are all involved in athletic programs in one way or another. My involvement with athletics has spanned the spectrum from coach, to parent/spectator, to school board member, to field maintenance consultant and even to being a registered basketball official.

One of the first things a referee learns is that he will upset half of the crowd each time he blows his whistle. School board members are in a similar position in that each decision they make upsets a part of the community. We have a standing joke whenever we see a large number of cars at a board meeting site; as we ask ourselves "What did we do wrong now?"

Certain school issues are guaranteed to increase attendance at meetings. These include featuring outstanding students or various forms of student entertainment; even though parents usually leave as soon as their child is finished. Other "hot" issues concern taxes; building issues such as new buildings or land acquisition; and athletics. Taking a closer look at each portion of our topic may give more insight into how to make the parts work for the betterment of all.

Putting STUDENTS first as in the title of this presentation should be the goal of everyone connected with school or community athletic programs. Athletics should be a fun part of the learning experience. They should have coaches who are good instructors and good role models, and they should have facilities that are safe for practice or competition. Those of us in the turf industry know the importance of providing good playing surfaces. Good maintenance must apply to practice fields as well as game fields since most athletes spend many more hours at practice than in games. It is our job to provide this for students.

Jack Roberts; Executive Director of the Michigan High School Athletic Association; once wrote in an editorial about his most satisfying season as a student athlete. He felt it was a most instructive season because the team finished with six wins and six losses; thus giving the players an equal opportunity to learn how to be good winners as well as learning humility in losing. As a little league coach I've had some teams that would have been happy to have had such an equal opportunity. Unfortunately, in our society coaches, no matter how good they are as instructors or role models, are measured in terms of W's and L's. The balance of these two letters seems to be especially important to some PARENTS.

Legendary Michigan State University coach "Duffy" Daugherty used to joke about receiving a telegram from the alumni that stated simply "We're behind you all the way coach, win or tie!" Fortunately, that isn't the case with the majority of parents. In fact we have a motto in Rockford that graces all of our publications.

QUALITY COMMUNITY, QUALITY SCHOOLS LOGO

Parents are an integral part of any athletic program, whether volunteering as coaches or umpires or going out and selling the community on new facilities. Working through boosters clubs they raise funds to provide needed equipment or facilities for sports programs. Boosters clubs will also come to the rescue of students who can't afford to be part of a "pay to play" program such as many school districts have instituted in the last few years. In addition, parents often form local educational foundations to raise funds for both academic and athletic programs such as an outdoor jogging track for the school facility.

Some parents do, however, get caught up in what I call the "My Kid Syndrome." They come to school board meetings encouraging changes in policies regarding athletics: but what they are really concerned about is the impact on their own student-athlete. For example we had one father contact the high school and district administrators regarding increased athletic trainer coverage for our teams; expressing concern over injuries. Not satisfied with the answers provided he wrote to the local newspaper inviting people with similar concerns to attend the next school board meeting. At that meeting he presented his concerns; based primarily on the fact that his son was hurt in a football game and still allowed to reenter the game later to kick a PAT. Although the father suggested otherwise, both the trainer and doctor who were on the sidelines gave permission for the kick.

When "pay to participate" was instituted last fall the same father came to lobby for lower fees feeling they were too high for the average athlete who would spend much time sitting on the bench or who couldn't afford the \$250. During his remarks he pointed out to the board that coaches would surely be able to find funds for athletes such as his son (a potential Division I player) if they couldn't afford to pay.

While some parents view athletic programs only through their own kids others look at the bigger picture. That was the case during the campaign for a new high school complex. Following defeat of the first bond proposal a community survey showed that one of the reasons for the defeat was a feeling that Rockford didn't need a second swimming pool since there was already one in the existing high school. One of my favorite comments at that time was "Why do we need a second pool when we have all of these lakes around here?"

Based upon the survey results a second election was held featuring separate ballot proposals for the high school and the pool. When the votes were counted the new building had passed easily but the pool was defeated. But we hadn't heard the end yet as a group of parents showed up at our next board meeting requesting another opportunity to vote for a swimming pool. They supported their request with an offer to collect 2500 petition signatures of pool supporters who would vote "yes" if given another chance. They carried through on their promise not only by gathering the necessary signatures, but by going out and campaigning for its successful passage.

The swimming pool issue also brings us to the next part of our discussion - POLITICS. It is very surprising at times what issues can divide a school board. In the case of a new swimming pool the board became divided over how to package the bond issue for voters. Something had to be done in response to the survey results, but which way to present the issue. The options considered included:

- 1) Vote for the entire project again as in the first election.
- 2) Separate the pool from the remainder of the bond issue.
- 3) Separate the pool but also reduce its scope and thereby its cost.

Following several heated discussions the board voted 4 - 3 to use option #2. One board member who favored reducing the pool's cost and was upset when it was defeated a second time stated "We'll have the best second class high school in Michigan." That attitude pervaded several board meetings until the parents group saved the day with its successful campaign.

It's really unfortunate that we even need to discuss politics and athletics in the same breath. But more and more we read about these strange bedfellows. We need look no further than MSU and its recent feuds involving the President and Football Coach/Athletic Director. Their internal bickering hurt not only the university's athletic program but its total image.

Politics in the local school district aren't quite so dramatic but that doesn't mean they are lacking. To quote our athletic director "A happy board is a supportive board." But no matter how much he does to keep the board happy situations; or as I prefer for the sake of this conference; "Turf Wars" do arise.

It might be just several groups fighting for use of the same field. Coaches, band directors, and local youth groups want to use fields and you as turf managers must have these fields ready; often at a moment's notice. It will mean adjusting maintenance schedules to work around band practices or rocket football games. Such maintenance adjustments are especially true in light of Regulation 637 and its restrictions regarding pesticide applications in and around schools.

But just try to deny use to one of these groups and watch the political sparks fly. Every taxpayer believes they are entitled to make use of school facilities. If they feel unjustifiably denied they will make sure the school board knows about it both verbally and through a paper trail of letters to the editor in the local newspaper.

Another interesting twist to "Turf Wars" is the idea of separate but equal fields. A district can provide enough fields for everyone but still have to endure complaints. For example, one district recently

built a new soccer field for its high school teams only to have the coach refuse to play there. His team still had to play in the football stadium, thus increasing the wear and tear on that turf area.

Other concerns of citizens arise from time to time regarding athletic programs. These concerns might involve the job a certain coach is doing, or who should fill a vacant coaching position. Or the concern might involve cross-country and track teams jogging along country roads instead of their track. As a board member we never quite know what to expect next.

And even new facilities do not insure an end to "turf Wars"; they just create new battlegrounds. With new facilities come additional activities both athletically and in the area of fine arts. All of a sudden many groups want to profit from this added exposure. Where only one group had sold concessions previously now many groups want a slice of the pie.

New facilities also create new opportunities for the public along with new demands. A new pool in conjunction with an indoor jogging track provides citizens with opportunities for "early-bird" recreation programs each morning. However, some of those citizens also want to be allowed to use the high school weight room as well. Their ultimate goal is to replace their expensive athletic club with the facilities available in the high school. Such requests can be met if the personnel and funding are available.

It is important to build a unified team that will work together in support of school and community athletic programs. Through the establishment of citizen's committees you develop a base of support that can be called upon to determine new facility needs or to sell bond and millage issues. Such committees also provide avenues of communication and information regarding athletic programs.

As turf managers you also need to develop strong relationships with coaches, administrators and board of education members. By working closely with these people you will be able to better control the usage of facilities. Athletic fields need time to recover and with the help of these others you will be able to produce a healthier safer playing surface for your students. All of us whether administrators, board members, coaches, parents or grounds managers must remember what we are all working for. Only when we remember that will the emphasis in this subject become STUDENTS first.

