



# media information

1661 ramblewood drive • east lansing, mi 48823 • 517.332.5046 • fax - 517.332.4071 • www.mhsaa.com

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Contact: John Johnson or Randy Allen

517.332.5046 or www.mhsaa.com

## **An MHSAA Commentary By Communications Director John Johnson: Nightline – What Took You So Long!**

**EAST LANSING, Mich. – Jan. 15** – Some of the best 30 minutes of television you can watch is ABC’s Nightline. I got hooked on the program over 20 years ago when it started covering events involving Iran, and feel it truly continues to give some of the best treatment to the hot news topics of the day without manufacturing those issues.

Last Wednesday’s (Jan. 9) show, “Kids, Sports & Violence,” was very well done. It framed the issues properly, using the backdrop of the Massachusetts trial involving the death of a father at a youth ice hockey practice.

I had only one question after the program was over (and I actually stayed up to watch it) – Nightline: What took you so long? What took you so long to project on our television screens something that has been a problem for a long time – parents behaving badly at kid’s games.

Before the incident in Massachusetts took place, and before a suburban Cleveland community conducted a “Silent Sunday” for its youth soccer league, where parents and coaches had to be speechless during that day’s games and just let the kids play; the Michigan High School Athletic Association and its member schools were already engaged in efforts to combat poor sportsmanship by spectators.

Some of the staple items of its ongoing Good Sports Are Winners! campaign – public address announcements, public service messages, sportsmanship kits and statewide sportsmanship summits – were put into action through the late 1980’s and early 90’s, and some elements targeted parents at that time. When behavior on the field on the part of coaches and student-athletes turned ugly in the mid 90’s, our schools pumped up the volume on their sportsmanship efforts and turned the coaches and players into the best behaved people at a school athletic event.

During the 1998-99 school year, however, our school athletic administrators and the leadership of the Michigan Interscholastic Athletic Administrators Association began to see that parental sportsmanship issues

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were escalating. In a great example of how the MHSAA works, schools and the MIAAA asked if the statewide athletic association they voluntarily belonged to could further assist them in their day-to-day efforts to promote good sportsmanship.

Following its mantra of listening to and then leading its member schools, the MHSAA produced the very successful six-minute video, “What Kids Wish Their Parents Knew About Sportsmanship” in the summer of 1999, and added to its annual sportsmanship kit it distributes to schools materials which were specifically geared toward dealing with educating parents on the need for good sportsmanship.

The success of the video exceeded our expectations. There are about as many copies of “What Kids Wish Their Parents Knew About Sportsmanship” in circulation in other states as there are in Michigan (about 4,000 copies). It has become a regular occurrence for our office to receive a quantity order of these tapes for another state high school athletic association or local recreation program to use.

Some accused the MHSAA at the time of targeting the wrong group, or unfairly “beating up” parents as a group too much. After watching the video being shown for the first time at my own kid’s school on a parent’s night, I saw a lot of heads nodding in agreement. Then one of the parents approving of what was being presented in the video went out and abused everyone in sight at an MHSAA tournament event later that year. That parent wasn’t alone in breaking sportsmanship standards or defying the reason school sports programs exist.

One of the reasons some of the Nightline panelists believed that parents act out negatively at youth sporting events is because they’ve lost the perspective of what the games are all about – that winning and the pipedream of an athletic college scholarship (which less than one percent of participants receive) has clouded the vision of many parents. I couldn’t agree more. An example of this twisted parental perspective is the ongoing litigation the MHSAA is involved in regarding the placement of school sports seasons being centered on college scholarships – not the opportunity to play high school sports.

In fact, living legend basketball coach Morgan Wooten of DeMatha High School in Maryland made the statement during the Nightlight program that parents now know just enough about their sport “to be dangerous” at their kid’s events. He’s right! I’ll cite some personal observations as examples.

Watching the end of one of my kid’s cross country meets, the mother of one of the runners ends up in the finish chute, chastising her child for not running at the pace she wanted in that meet (the child won the race going away). The same mother, at another meet, verbally snapped back at the team’s coach in mid-race with a choice vulgarity when the coach told her that he wanted the kids to run at a relaxed pace in that

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particular meet. At another meet, while I was hustling over from the one-mile mark to the two-mile mark of the course, I saw a father, whom I knew was from my kid's school, but whom I hadn't really met, yelling at his wife to make sure that she got the time off the clock at the two-mile split for their youngster. This wasn't a "it would be nice if we knew" kind of thing, it was clear this guy was going to be very upset if his wife didn't get the time, if his kid's time wasn't up to Dad's standards, and he really had his game face on. The husband continued walking towards a point before the two-mile split. I walked up to the wife, who was visibly embarrassed by her husband's behavior and told her I could see the clock from where we were standing and would help her.

Finally, at the parent's night for fall sports at my kid's school back in August, as the program moved towards its conclusion, I overheard a parent in the stands behind me say, "If they think they're going to talk to us about sportsmanship again, I'm out of here!" Parents continue to have an anti-sportsmanship, I-can-do-what-I-want attitude, and so the need to continually keep this topic at the forefront is necessary.

So, thank you Nightline, for presenting your take on parental sportsmanship, and the need for it to improve at all levels of sports. This just shouldn't have been the first time you addressed the topic.

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**Note:** You can listen to this commentary by [clicking here](#).

**The video, "What Kids Wish Their Parents Knew About Sportsmanship" is available for purchase from the MHSAA office at a cost of \$10 each, which includes shipping and handling. Bulk discounts are available. The video, and other materials the MHSAA provides its schools on sportsmanship, can be viewed on the MHSAA Web Site – <http://www.mhsaa.com/services/smship.html>**

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