

# Spectator Behavior Guide

## Harford Christian School Athletics

Accepting behavioral norms of the culture without subjecting them to biblical evaluation, is perhaps one of the greatest challenges confronting Christian school athletic programs. At Harford Christian School, coaches are expected to “hold the bar high” for themselves and their athletes in the area of Christian conduct. Demeanor towards opponents and referees, discriminating between lawful/unlawful tactics to gain an advantage, retaliatory fouls, verbal responses, and a host of other competition-related behaviors are items for continual discussion and instruction. While the coach has a significant influence upon player conduct, his ability to implement the same influence upon spectators is greatly diminished. Spectators are, however, a component of the game day context and efforts should be made to educate them regarding their influence and responsibilities. Spectators often set the tone of a contest, which can range from hostile and angry to friendly and supportive, and anything in between. It is worth noting that actions and words of spectators can sometimes incite well-meaning athletes to respond inappropriately on the field. The great difficulty is that spectators typically do not view themselves as “under any authority” while viewing a sporting event. For that reason, this paper is a plea for cooperation and compliance with biblical spectator standards.

The purpose of this paper is to set forth expected behaviors for HCS spectators as related to Harford Christian School athletics. While attempting to be concise, explanations are provided in order to give the rationale behind each point. The *Spectator Behavior Guide* is organized with five words. Note that each point corresponds with the letters of the word “**S-P-O-R-T.**”

### **S**avory

The choice of word here is purposefully biblical. Christ instructed His followers that they were to be a savory salt. He went on to say that if the salt loses its savor, it may as well be thrown in a pathway to be “trodden under foot.” Salt has a purifying and preserving effect upon whatever it comes into contact with. HCS fans should have a purifying effect upon those around them by behaving distinctively Christian. If well-behaved and disciplined athletes can positively stand out in contrast to “normal” player conduct, then well-mannered and self-restrained spectators can have the same effect in the context of game day. Spectators who exhibit the behaviors outlined in this document WILL stand out in contrast to what is natural behavior. Spectator conduct spirals “downward” when opposing fans banter with one another. In other words, poor spectator behavior feeds on poor spectator behavior and only grows worse. In contrast, proper spectator behavior can, and often does, positively impact the environment. That is not to say that behaving positively ALWAYS guarantees that other spectators will follow in step, however, consistent positive spectator behavior typically has a positive influence in the group dynamic of fans. Savory spectator behavior requires diligence and effort and pays big dividends.

## **P**oised

HCS spectator conduct should not be affected by circumstances of the competition. A wise father once stated that a man's character is revealed during adversity. Adversity is not limited to players in competition. Spectator adversity is real. Atrocious officiating happens. HCS players and coaches are capable of making "bad" tactical decisions that affect the outcome of the contest. Players from the opposing team may use unethical tactics in seeking to gain an advantage or to intimidate. Opposing spectators may be rude and obnoxious. All too often these competition realities can turn a well-intentioned and mild group of spectators into an unruly and retaliatory mob. Maintain the higher ground no matter what the circumstances! Mom's emotions are especially vulnerable when her "precious offspring" has been victimized by an opponent or when a referee fails to call a foul committed against her "baby." In the big picture of game day, a spectator losing control over his emotions does not accomplish anything right or productive. Referees are not swayed by an angry mom or dad. Referees are human and capable of making judgment errors. In my years of coaching youth sports, I have rarely, if ever, observed a referee "cave" to a griping or irate parent. More often, the referee may have a mom or dad removed from the game venue for "out-of-control" behavior. Poise is a demonstration an even temperament is what the Bible refers to as meekness, which means strength under control. Poise never allows match circumstances to excuse poor spectator behavior.

## **O**ptimistic

HCS spectators should ALWAYS focus on the positive. Finding the "silver lining" in every circumstance, while not easy to do, is appropriate conduct. If a goalkeeper gives up an accidental goal, find a way to encourage that goalkeeper. Don't forget the many good saves that have been made before the "oops." If basketball players are missing lay-ups, they don't need to be verbally reminded that they should have scored on those opportunities. Players know when they "blow it" and don't forget . . . making shots in the heat of a contest is not as easy as it looks. A good speaking rule to follow is this - **if what you are going to say is not positive or constructive . . . DON'T SAY IT!** Examples of positive and/or constructive comments are listed below.

- |   |                                 |   |                                     |
|---|---------------------------------|---|-------------------------------------|
| + | "C'mon guys we need to hustle!" | + | "That's 'ok' keeper, shake it off!" |
| + | "See the pass guys!"            | + | "Ladies, watch that off-side line!" |
| + | "Let's win those 50/50 balls!"  | + | "Let's play good defense"           |

Negative comments listed here line up with their corresponding positive comment above.

- |   |                                       |   |  |
|---|---------------------------------------|---|--|
| - | "You're not hustling guys!"           | - | "Wow . . . keeper you have to make that save!" |
| - | "Quit dribbling and pass the ball!"   | - | "Quit with the off-sides!"                     |
| - | "We are not winning the 50/50 balls!" | - | "C'mon you have to play defense!"              |

When it comes to verbal comments, there is always a way to state things positively. During match play, any criticism directed toward athletes needs to fall within the domain of the coach. The fan base needs to be an impetus of OPTIMISTIC cheering. Remember that athletes want to succeed more than you could possibly

want them to succeed. Sometimes they are successful and sometimes they fail (just like all of us). Remaining positive, regardless of success/failure, boosts confidence and ultimately enhances success.

## **R**espectful

### **Parent (Spectator) to Parent (Spectator):**

Please follow this rule –**Respond or speak as if every player’s mother were sitting next to you.** The fact is . . . they may be, and often are, sitting within ear range of your comment or eye range of your body language. I am amazed at how many spectators make negative comments directed at an actual player (by name) and in turn, offend a family member or close friend of the player being criticized. Put yourselves in the shoes of the dad who hears a spectator negatively comment about his son or daughter missing a shot, or dribbling too much, or lacking skills. This is why **O**ptimism is important! If all your comments and body language are constructive and positive, you should not have to worry about others being offended by what you say or show. It is worth remembering, however, that even a neutral comment directed towards a player may result in being a hurtful comment to another. For instance, Goalkeeper X misses making a save and a parent states to Goalkeeper Y’s (who is on the bench) mother that Goalkeeper Y would have made that save. While being complimentary to Goalkeeper Y and his mother, the comment is hurtful to Goalkeeper X’s mom or friends within hearing range. Respect for every other spectator, regardless of their conduct, is very important.

### **Parent (Spectator) to Coach:**

Coaches tend to have thick skin when it comes to criticism. “Arm-chair” quarterbacks are a “dime a dozen.” Engrained in the cultural norm is the idea that criticizing and second guessing the coach is acceptable conduct. Hey . . . that’s what ESPN is all about! Coaches are not perfect and do not make perfect substitution rotations. Nor do they implement perfect strategies for each game. Don’t forget, however, that the coach is vested with the responsibility of making those decisions and must live with the consequences, while spectator criticism is free, with no consequences to the one doing the criticizing. In other words, if you are not in the coach’s shoes don’t criticize and second guess his decisions. Is that to suggest that coaches should be exempt from all criticism? . . . certainly not. There is a proper time and place to have discourse with a coach . . . that time and place is not in the bleachers surrounded by fans (and maybe his wife).

### **Parent (Spectator) to Players:**

Since the need for positive spectator conduct toward one’s own team members has already been addressed, consider spectator behavior towards opposing players. Remember, the kids in the opposing uniforms are just that . . . “kids.” They are not the enemy. In some instances they may be ill-mannered and mean-spirited, but they are still kids who need to see adults modeling proper behavior. Should spectators cheer when an opposing player receives a technical foul or yellow card? Absolutely not! If the technical foul or card came from unsportsmanlike conduct, that is a time when spectators should sit in sober silence and pray that lessons will be learned from consequences. How easy it is to revel in an opposing team’s failures or earned penalties. Not wanting to be misunderstood, the following clarification is offered. When an ill-mannered and unlawful player or team receives proper justice in the form of penalty, it is acceptable to find satisfaction that misbehavior was met with consequence, but to cheer or become verbal in that instance, is not a proper manifestation of respect. Conversely, excellent play from opponents should be complimented. There is nothing traitorous about complimenting individuals or team play from the opponent. Quality play should be

appreciated regardless of the color of uniform. Rather than viewing this as “cheering for the other team,” view it as complimenting the God-given gifts and abilities that are being demonstrated by a player whose body is “fearfully and wonderfully made.”

### **Parent (Spectator) to Officials:**

At an early age parents engrain in our children the necessity of respecting authority. Parents instruct them how to respond to adults and to people who are in charge of them. Imagine if a student in a classroom did not agree with how the teacher was teaching and stated out loud “you are not teaching this like it should be taught . . . it should be this way or that way!” Most people would conclude that the student is way “out of bounds” and deserves punishment for disrespect. Suppose in a work environment an employee tells the boss how things should be? Did you hear “there’s the door!”? Why are these examples so easy to agree upon, yet when we consider an example of a coach verbally dissenting with an official or a player expressing disagreement over a call, we excuse these as “just part of the game.” Here, perhaps, is where an unbiblical cultural norm has become most entrenched. Disrespect to authority is disrespect to authority – no matter how you slice it! Forget what professional or college athletes and coaches model as normal behavior. Parents never teach their children that because “everybody’s doing it . . . it’s ok.” We need to be biblically discerning on this matter. God clearly instructs those under an authority to honor and respect that authority. That mandate is not conditional, based upon their quality of performance or godliness. Referees, umpires, and officials are THE AUTHORITY over the game venue. Biblically, we are to honor and respect them as the authority under which we are to submit. There is “no room” for working the officials in a Christian context of spectator conduct. Officials are not exempt from criticism and evaluation, but there are processes in place to accommodate those needs. Criticism and evaluation should not be coming from spectators at a game.

## **T**eachable

Having sports “IQ” contributes to good spectator behavior. Offsides in soccer and offensive charge vs. blocking foul in basketball are some of the most misunderstood rules in athletics. How often do parents question an official’s call of one of these, and in doing so, display ignorance of the rules of the game? Spectators without a knowledge of the sport they are watching should be especially careful to be “slow to speak and quick to listen.” Sports rule books are easily accessible. If you don’t want to take time to read a rulebook, ask people who understand about rules of that particular sport. They can help explain some of the complexities of the sport and its rules. Remember though, that some tournaments and leagues have adopted their own rules variations, and probably for good reasons. As a general rule, the referee has a distinct advantage of being on the field or court and being close to the action, not unlike an umpire calling “balls” and “strikes” behind the plate. The visual perspective from the bleachers is deficient compared to the one on the field or court. A teachable fan is more likely to respond properly to officiating. Educated spectators enhance appropriate fan behavior.

Some reader may conclude “these 5 points are just NOT natural responses.” You are exactly correct! Followers of Jesus Christ should not be responding naturally as the culture does. Followers of Christ respond biblically, with savor, and a brightness that stands in stark contrast to “business as usual!”