

Newark (NJ) Star Ledger written by Mark Di Ionna

**Sore losers in sports? Don't blame it on refs
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It's that time of year. League championships. County tournaments. State playoffs.

The time when we see the best in kid leagues and high school sports.

Unfortunately, we also see the worst.

Because, it seems, many dramatic moments are undermined by verbal, often vulgar, abuse aimed at referees. Many winning celebrations are marred by sore losers, taking their frustration out on the officials.

This is sports today. Cheering drowned out by jeering.

Forget all those 1950s, crew-cut coach anachronisms about sportsmanship and character building. They are as dead as the DeSoto. At every level of youth sports -- from CYO basketball, Pop Warner football, and Little League to the high school state finals -- the referee is becoming everybody's favorite excuse.

You lose?

Blame the ref.

You get out-worked, out-smarted or out-coached?

Ref's fault.

"It's getting worse," said Tim Wyatt, a wrestling ref with three decades of experience. "The kids mouth off more now than they used to."

And who do they learn it from?

"It stems from the parents and coaches," Wyatt said. "We know when we go to X-place the coach is a jerk, and the parents and fans, and now the kids, emulate that behavior and we're going to be in for a rough night."

And just as the gracious winner went out with the end-zone dance, the good loser was killed off by college and pro coaches and managers getting all that camera time screaming at refs or kicking dirt at umpires.

Truth is, there is something entertaining, even comical, about a Bobby Knight meltdown. But here is where the line gets blurred: Professional and big-time

college sports are about entertainment. Youth and high school sports are supposed to be about education. Teamwork. Sportsmanship. Fair play. Doing your best. Stuff like that.

"I believe there is a greater level of abuse, verbal and even physical, and it stems from a greater emphasis on winning," said Larry White, an assistant director of the NJSIAA and the liaison to the state's thousands of officials. "One of the great lessons in life is learning how to accept defeat graciously. There is not always something or somebody to blame."

But blame is what they're learning. From their coaches and parents.

"People don't see the game as a continuum, with many different wrinkles from beginning to end," White said. "They focus on the one play, or one call, on which to blame a loss."

In other words, it's not the 15-point run your team allowed in the third quarter, it's the fourth-quarter bad-call foul that cost you the game. Blame the ref. Scream at the ref. Abuse the ref.

Truth is, there is nothing entertaining or comical about some of the coach, kid or parent meltdowns that happen in school gyms or on playing fields everywhere these days.

Lesley Loeb, a field hockey referee for 28 years, says the problem is becoming dangerously serious. In the past few years, she had to take out a restraining order against one parent and had to pull a field hockey stick out of her trunk to fend off another.

"It's crazy out there," she said. "Parents are too emotionally attached to their children's sports."

Loeb says the added emphasis -- and cost -- on youth sports is taking the "play" out of "game."

"For parents now, it's financial," she said. "They spend so much money on camps, and year-round clinics, and private coaching, and indoor leagues. Not to mention time. All these weekend tournaments, and travel teams. The parents have so much invested, just hoping their kid gets a (college) scholarship."

And losing sticks a pin in that dream bubble, flimsy as it is. It means your kid, your kid's team, is not the best. With all that time and money invested, it has to be somebody's fault.

Blame the ref.

We are creating a nation of crybabies and sore losers, and "injured-parties" like the lawyer from Morristown who is suing the Randolph school district because he was thrown out of the gym for yelling at a referee during his daughter's high school basketball game.

What makes winter sports worse than other seasons for refs is the proximity of the fans.

"They're right on top of you," Wyatt said. "Me, I've been at it a long time so I have thick skin, but for some of the younger guys, it makes it harder to ignore. A lot of guys won't go to certain places. It's not worth it."

And if it keeps up, there won't be any refs left to blame.

"It's going over the edge," White said. "It's getting to the point where people don't want to officiate."

Then who loses?