

ERIC SONDHEIMER

Ethics Are Moving Back to the Forefront

By Eric Sondheimer

Cheaters in high school sports, beware. The tide is turning. Your protectors are dwindling.

Across the state, men and women of principle are rising up to challenge those who violate rules.

Coaches who illegally recruit athletes are being fired. Students who falsify addresses are being declared ineligible. Teams that use ineligible players are forfeiting games. Superintendents, principals and athletic directors are feeling empowered because programs such as Michael Josephson's "Pursuing Victory With Honor" are inspiring them to take action.

"This is stuff my parents and grandparents tried to teach," said football Coach Richard Fong of North Hills L.A. Baptist High. "We got away from it. I'm glad the pendulum may be swinging back."

The Southern Section, City Section and Catholic Athletic Assn. are moving toward imposing a one-year varsity eligibility restriction on athletes who transfer without moving, a critical component to convincing parents that their main focus should be on education and not sports.

Transfer restrictions aren't going to reduce the influence of club coaches and private coaches determined to steer pupils to programs they prefer, but it's a step toward restoring a semblance of integrity to high school sports.

Since 2000, there have been 906 high schools in California that have signed on to "Pursuing Victory With Honor." It's a program designed to promote sportsmanship, build character and restore ethics.

At first, there was skepticism. There's more to teaching sportsmanship than having T-ball players chant, "Two, four, six, eight, who do we appreciate."

High school sports participants have already been hardened in their beliefs through years of experiences--positive and negative.

People with good intentions, though, have used Josephson's initiative to strengthen their sense of right and wrong.

This month, Ambassador Christian, a small private school in Fontana, dismissed its baseball coaching staff for alleged recruiting violations. The school's athletic director

briefly resigned when he thought no action would be taken against the coaching staff.

"For me, it was an ethical question and a matter of doing what was right," Athletic Director Don McAllister Jr. said.

There's an unspoken rule between many administrators and coaches: Scratch my back and I'll scratch yours.

That often causes people to look the other way when questionable behavior occurs, whether it's repeated use of profanity or a coach encouraging team members to recruit athletes from other schools.

But Josephson is leading a campaign to apply positive peer pressure to reverse the tide.

"It's a chance to put the cheaters on the run," he said. "I absolutely see a sea change. It's not nearly complete or reached every quarter, but the momentum has grown and is building, and it's right. People want to take sports back."

Interscholastic athletics were never intended to serve solely as a vehicle for developing elite athletes and big-name coaches.

High schools devote large sums of money and resources to field teams for the purpose of offering educational experiences.

"How you play the game and how many kids get to play the game is a central core for education," Josephson said.

Athletes and coaches should aspire to become champions, but courage needs to be summoned to not let the intoxication of victory blind those in authority from taking action against cheaters.

"I think people are fed up and tired of seeing people who don't follow the rules get away with it," Fong said. "There has to be a culture to where we agree what's right, what's wrong and have to live up to it."

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