

Winning Wasn't as Important as Doing Right

With two runners on base and a strike against her, Sara Tucholsky of Western Oregon University uncorked her best swing and did something she had never done, in high school or college. Her first home run cleared the center-field fence.

But it appeared to be the shortest of dreams come true when she missed first base, started back to tag it and collapsed with a knee injury. She crawled back to first but could do no more. The first-base coach said she would be called out if her teammates tried to help her. Or, the umpire said, a pinch runner could be called in, and the homer would count as a single.

Then, members of the Central Washington University softball team stunned spectators by carrying Tucholsky around the bases Saturday so the three-run homer would count -- an act that contributed to their own elimination from the playoffs.

Central Washington first baseman Mallory Holtman, the career home run leader in the Great Northwest Athletic Conference, asked the umpire if she and her teammates could help Tucholsky. The umpire said there was no rule against it.

So Holtman and shortstop Liz Wallace put their arms under Tucholsky's legs, and she put her arms over their shoulders. The three headed around the base paths, stopping to let Tucholsky touch each base with her good leg.

"The only thing I remember is that Mallory asked me which leg was the one that hurt," Tucholsky said. "I told her it was my right leg and she said, 'OK, we're going to drop you down gently and you need to touch it with your left leg,' and I said 'OK, thank you very much.'"

"She said, 'You deserve it, you hit it over the fence,' and we all kind of just laughed."

"We started laughing when we touched second base," Holtman said. "I said, 'I wonder what this must look like to other people.'"

"We didn't know that she was a senior or that this was her first home run," Wallace said Wednesday. "That makes the story more touching than it was. We just wanted to help her."

Holtman said she and Wallace weren't thinking about the playoff spot, and didn't consider the gesture something others wouldn't do.

As for Tucholsky, the 5-foot-2 right fielder was focused on her pain. "I really didn't say too much. I was trying to breathe," she told The Associated Press in a telephone interview Wednesday. "I didn't realize what was going on until I had time to sit down and let the pain relax a little bit," she said. "Then I realized the extent of what I actually did."

"I hope I would do the same for her in the same situation," Tucholsky added.

As the trio reached home plate, Tucholsky said, the entire Western Oregon team was in tears.

Central Washington coach Gary Frederick, a 14-year coaching veteran, called the act of sportsmanship "unbelievable." For Western Oregon coach Pam Knox, the gesture resolved the dilemma Tucholsky's injury presented.

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“She was going to kill me if we sub and take (the home run) away. But at the same time I was concerned for her. I didn’t know what to do,” Knox said.

Tucholsky’s injury is a possible torn ligament that will sideline her for the rest of the season, and she plans to graduate in the spring with a degree in business. Her home run sent Western Oregon to a 4-2 victory, ending Central Washington’s chances of winning the conference and advancing to the playoffs.

“In the end, it is not about winning and losing so much,” Holtman said. “It was about this girl. She hit it over the fence and was in pain, and she deserved a home run.” - *By Joseph Frazier, The Star Tribune, May 1, 2008*

Gagne Out as Lewiston Coach

Parents, students, coaches, teachers and school administrators filled the back half of the conference room at Lewiston Regional Technical Center’s new culinary arts facility, many of them patiently waiting for a turn to speak at the School Committee meeting Monday night. Most left without saying a word.

News of the potential departure of high school hockey coach Norm Gagne has energized the community for the past week.

Gagne insists he didn’t resign. School officials maintain that he did - and that they accepted his resignation. The letter, submitted to Superintendent of Schools Leon Levesque and signed by Gagne, bears the subject line, “Head Coaching Position” and contains one sentence: “This is notification to withdraw my name from consideration for the above position.”

The date on the top of the letter is May 12. Levesque signed the document, effectively accepting the resignation, two days later, on May 14. “I don’t understand how it could be more clear,” Levesque said.

At the committee meeting, groups of parents and students arrived in waves, some in favor of Gagne, others against him. But state law precludes the committee from discussing, in a public forum, matters of personnel, even during the section of the meeting open to public comment.

After the section for public input came and went without any mention of Gagne, the committee saw there were still people in the room who wanted to speak, and opened a second round of public discussion, again cautioning anyone who spoke to avoid speaking on personnel issues. Gary Prolman, the chairman of the Maine High School Hockey Invitational in Portland and a longtime friend of Gagne, spoke about the coach glowingly while dancing around the rules. Lewiston junior Jake Brown, one of next season’s captains, circulated a petition signed by 20 of the 23 returning players in favor of Gagne returning next season as the team’s head coach.

Thomas Shannon, the chairman of the Lewiston School Committee, then reminded Brown - and others in the room - that the issue was dead. “Events have transpired,” Shannon said. “There is written documentation, error or no error, mistake or no mistake. We have a process we now must follow, and we will. That does not preclude a former employee from reapplying for the position, nor does past history influence that person’s evaluation for fitness for the position.”

“The process has to start over,” committee member John Butler Jr. said. “We have a letter. The process has to take precedence. It’s an open position.”

A short time later, the room emptied. Pods of parents and students congregated in the main dining room afterward. Some offered handshakes and kind words to Gagne, others chose to keep their distance, saying only that they were disappointed because Gagne doesn’t embody the “Sports Done Right” philosophy. That’s an initiative to encourage sportsmanship and scholarship.

As he left the building, Gagne said his decision on whether to reapply for the position was still a few days coming.

“I certainly appreciate all the support I’ve been getting from the community,” Gagne said. “I had so many e-mails from people all across the state, from superintendents to athletic directors. I’m disappointed in the way it turned out, but I’m going to think about it, and I might apply back, because of the kids and their support.” - *By Justin Pelletier, Lewiston SunJournal, May 20, 2008*

Youth League to Chew Over Snack Duty

Youth sports officials in Freetown are reviewing a rule that suspends young baseball players if their parents fail to help run the concession stand for a required amount of time. The reconsideration follows a high-profile standoff this month between league officials and a mother whose son was suspended for two games because she missed snack-bar duty.

“It’s time to talk about it,” David Brouillette, president of the Freetown Youth Athletic Association, said this week. “Believe me, this has gotten so far out of hand.” The issue is on the league’s June 12 meeting agenda.

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Though the rule went into effect last year and led to the suspension of six players, it wasn't put under the public spotlight until Jodie Hooper failed to make her scheduled shift on May 7 because she had to work at her full-time job. As a result, her 7-year-old son was suspended from his Freetown Little League team.

According to Brouillette, the rule was put in place because parents too often were failing to show up for their scheduled shifts at the concession stand, causing the league to lose money because there wasn't enough personnel to monitor the counter, sell candy, and cook burgers. He said the stand - where a burger, soda, and fries go for about \$5 - brings in about \$30,000 a year, which helps pay for field equipment, umpire salaries, electricity, and water.

"Without the money from the concession stand, the parents would be asked to pay a lot more than the \$50 to \$115 they already pay to have their kids play," he said.

Hooper said that when she signed up her son to play baseball, she was aware that she was also signing a contract that called for her to serve one night at the concession stand or face having her child suspended. "But I thought I would be given some consideration because I had to go to work," she said. "And I didn't have a list of people I could have called to fill in for me."

Hooper said that when she pleaded her case to Brouillette, he told her "that's the rule" and upheld the suspension. She responded by taking her issue to the local media.

Within days, Hooper, Brouillette, and even Selectwoman Jean Fox found themselves fielding phone calls from media outlets from as far away as Alabama and Tennessee. "Good Morning America" interviewed Hooper armed with an in-studio child psychologist to discuss any lingering affects the suspension might have on her son. Bloggers began taking sides. Heroes or villains? Everyone, it seemed, had an opinion.

"It was brutal," Brouillette said. "The comments were getting nasty. The worst moment for me was when one of our league officials, this woman, was accosted in a BJ's store by some guy who hated the rule. The guy made our official leave BJ's in tears. I was a bad guy to a lot of people who didn't know me or understand the rule."

Hooper - who acknowledged she was invited by Brouillette to attend a league meeting to voice her concerns, but said no because she was "too angry" - said she, too, was made a target. "I was getting bashed left and right," she said. "People outside of town were siding with me, but people who live in this town seemed to really be against me, saying I should just shut up and play by the rules."

Hooper said things turned ugly when she came across a blog on a newspaper site that contained personal information about her that had nothing to do with the issue at hand.

"At that point, it started to really bother me," said Hooper, a married, 33-year-old mother of two. "This whole thing had taken on a life of its own."

Fox agreed: "It was shining an inappropriate light on Freetown and dividing the town. And both David and Jodie were getting beat up publicly."

Last week, Brouillette said he had had enough, and called Hooper to talk it through. They spent two hours on the phone. Both stood their ground but left the door open for compromise. "She understood where I was coming from and I could see where she was coming from," he said. "Jodie realizes we are just trying to protect the league. Right or wrong, we use kids as collateral."

Hooper told Brouillette that if she could do it over again, she might not be so quick to go public, choosing instead to fight her battle internally with the league. "I was looking at it from the players' side," she said. "I have to remember that Dave has to look at it from the league's side."

Both sides agree the current rule is far from perfect. Hooper suggested to Brouillette that the league set up a mentoring program through which high school students could work with the league, including staffing the concession stand, as part of community service.

He told her the league could look at reducing future suspensions to just one game. At the very least, he said, each parent of a league player will be given a list of phone numbers so that they can find a replacement if they can't make their scheduled shift.

"No matter what happens from here, at least Jodie and I finally talked," Brouillette said. "Neither of us ever wanted to be dragged through the mud over all this. Jodie was protecting her child and I was protecting the league. It's just that when it got into the media's hands, everything broke loose." - *By Robert Carroll, The Boston Globe, May 26, 2008*

On the Sidelines: Players Pick Up On Parents' Attitudes

High on a home win, the Oshkosh West High School girls varsity softball players would drop everything and rush over to pick out their cupcake. Shaped like softballs and marked with each girl's name and number, the "victory" cakes were something special Julie Hart, with the help of fellow Oshkosh mom Dawn Pommerening, cooked up to support daughters Lisa Hart and Sarah Pommerening, and the team they'd watched grow for a decade.

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“It’s their last year in high school,” Hart said. “I thought, being their senior year, it was a good idea to do, to make it more special.” The West girls won all but a single home game, but it’s the hard-fought and earned victories on – and off – the field that these supportive parents will treasure as their daughters graduate and gear up to play for the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh Titans this fall.

“Life experiences and life lessons were gained,” Pommerening said. “Teamwork, leadership, discipline, watching Sarah go through different obstacles, overcoming challenges on the field; it made her a better person, and she’ll take that into adulthood.”

Sideline support

The Oshkosh West seniors say they’re lucky to have parents who’ve encouraged them to explore their athletic abilities, always attending games and going the extra mile to offer advice and support, even traveling out of state for traveling tournaments.

Sarah Pommerening, 17, who’s played softball since she was 7, said it means a lot to hear her mom screaming in excitement as she rounds the bases, or to meet her dad in a high-five between at-bats. Because she realizes some players don’t have that kind of relationship with their parents on the sidelines. During other sporting events over the years, the teen admits she’s witnessed how parents’ negative criticism from the sidelines brings players down, lowers their self-esteem and just disrupts the game.

“For instance, if they would foul off the ball or have a bad hit, a dad would say, ‘oh, what are you doing? Straighten that up,’” she said. “You can hear sometimes when parents will say stuff on other teams; they’ll pick up their kids yelling and the kids will shout back ... and the only thing they’re doing by yelling at them is making the players struggle more.”

And it’s when more attention is drawn to action on the sidelines than on the field that something needs to be done, local experts and coaches say.

Off-the-field distractions

Dr. Erica Kroncke, pediatrician and sports medicine physician at Theda Care in Oshkosh, says more parents in recent years are lashing out at officials or acting obnoxiously from the stands. “You do see a lot of yelling at the officials, yelling at the coaches, sometime profanity, at very young ages for youth events,” she said. “You’ll see it in your soccer, your youth football, any high-contact, high-risk sports.”

Coach and president of the Oshkosh Youth Baseball organization Kevin Harvot has seen many parents get too intense from the stands, especially when kids reach ages 9 and 10 and competition levels starts to rise. “We all want to see our child succeed and do good,” Harvot said. But the players don’t need a parent from the stands reminding them what to do; they just need to listen to their coaches and teammates and be part of a team, he added.

Mom Pommerening said she noticed games get more serious when teens hit the high-school level, too. “There’s an intensity, more so when they’re on varsity in high school because the competition’s quite strong,” she said, adding that what’s important is for parents to keep a good attitude and be role models for their children. “For us, it’s just enjoyable as parents to watch them play, to share in their successes and disappointments.”

Roots of ‘sideline rage’

Maybe the pressure is on for their son or daughter to earn an athletic scholarship to college, or a parent’s own sports career was cut short. Or perhaps they just had a bad day. “Sometimes it comes out just like road rage ... as a way of offloading their daily frustrations,” Kroncke said of outbursts in the stands. In addition to getting fired up in the stands, Kroncke said she’s also seen parents so intense about sports that they go against doctor’s advice about an injury if it means time on the bench.

“There are parents perhaps going against medical advice to ensure their kids are playing, which is concerning,” Kroncke said.

At the heart of it all, though, local experts say adults, in general, need to pay attention to how their behavior affects young players. “There’s a lot of people that impact an athlete’s perspective – not only parents but a coach, teammates, siblings, that group of fans,” Kroncke said. “Think about all the lessons you want your kids to learn, at a young age; you want them to have fun and know it isn’t all about winning.”

Lisa Hart, 18, who started playing T-ball around age 6, said she’s thankful her parents never caused scenes or negatively criticized her abilities. In fact, they often threw the ball around with her and, any days she felt in a slump, told her “you can do it.” That her mom came up the “victory cupcakes” this year was a special treat. “It’s good to know she wants to do something for us, and show how much she likes to watch us,” Hart said. Adds mom Julie, “it’s not just about the cupcakes; it’s support for the girls.” - *By Sarah Owen, The Northwestern, May 5, 2008*

Referee Chokes Coach

A coach who was choked by a referee Saturday during a basketball tournament sponsored by a Maumelle-based organization said Monday that he has no ill will against the official. Mickey Shaffer of Poyen said he was coaching the Lady Wings from central Arkansas as they competed in the seventh- and eighth-grade girls division of the Challenge of Champions tournament in Little Rock when he questioned a referee's call and the referee, whose name he did not know, called a technical foul on him.

Shaffer said he sat down but continued objecting to the call, and the referee called a second technical foul and ejected him from the game. Shaffer said he was getting his "two cents in" on his way out when the referee grabbed him by the throat and choked him for a few seconds.

The choking, captured in a photo by LaJuan Mooney of the Saline County Voice, "looks a lot worse than it was," said Shaffer, who is head girls basketball coach at Poyen High School.

"It wasn't any drawn-out, all-over-the-place thing," Shaffer said. "It was just a quick, spur-of-the-moment thing."

The tournament was sponsored by Youth Sports America, based in Maumelle. Tim Loring, national director of the organization, said Tuesday that he had been out of town for several days and did not know any details about the incident or who the referee was.

"I'm just getting back," he said. "We don't know nothing yet. I'm just finding out about it right now."

The tournament was held at the Court of Dreams facility in southwest Little Rock, which has three courts. The referee who choked Shaffer was removed from the game and swapped with a referee from a game on another court, witnesses said.

The mother of a Lady Wings team member said the referee should have been ejected from the tournament. She said she planned to complain about his behavior.

"He way overreacted, and he did a malicious thing in front of a lot of kids," said the parent, who asked that her name not be used. "When you're in that kind of position, you're supposed to be about sportsmanship and all this, and if you don't have any more self-control than that, you just don't need to be in that position."

Shaffer said he did not complain about the referee's behavior and did not plan to. He said he regretted his own behavior in the incident.

"I've been coaching for a long time, and sometimes things happen and sometimes you get madder than you should," he said. "I apologized to my team and my parents after the game. If I saw that guy, I would say, 'Man, I'm sorry.'"

The Court of Dreams facility is owned by Positive Atmosphere Reaches Kids, or PARK, an outreach program founded by former NFL player Keith Jackson for children at risk of dropping out of school.

Kareem Moody, program director for PARK, said PARK rented out the facility to Youth Sports America for the tournament but had nothing to do with hiring the referees. - *By John Lyon, The Arkansas News Bureau, May 23, 2008*

Family of Brain-injured Ballplayer Sues Bat Maker and Little League

The family of a 14-year-old Wayne boy who suffered brain damage two years ago after he was hit in the chest with a line drive while pitching in a Wayne baseball league filed a lawsuit yesterday against the company that made the bat.

The Domalewskis also are suing Little League baseball, which sanctioned the bat, and the Sports Authority, which sold it. The family's attorney, Ernesto Fronzuto, argued that Louisville Slugger and other manufacturers have engaged in an "arms race" by producing metal bats designed to make balls fly off them at high speeds that are unsafe for the fielders, especially the pitcher.

The lawsuit alleges that the bat -- a 31-inch, 19-ounce Louisville Slugger TPX Platinum -- violates New Jersey's Product Liability and Consumer Fraud acts.

Steven Domalewski, who was 12 when he was struck while pitching in the Wayne Police Athletic League, cannot walk or talk and resumed drinking and eating only this winter, his parents said.

"We miss Steven, we miss the boy that he was," said his mother, Nancy.

Wearing jeans and a Yankees shirt, Steven attended yesterday's news conference about the lawsuit. Strapped in a wheelchair, he seemed to listen intently at times, laughing when his father called him a "scutch" and bucking back and forth in his wheelchair when his father mentioned his physical therapy session at a horse ranch.

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Steven suffered commotio cordis, a rare condition caused by blunt impact to the chest during the millisecond window between heartbeats, and went into cardiac arrest. His heart stopped beating for about 15 minutes and after he was resuscitated on the field, he went into a coma and was hospitalized for eight months.

Louisville Slugger's parent company, Hillerich & Bradsby, said Steven's injury happens more often from thrown balls than batted ones.

"Our 124-year-old, fifth-generation family owned company never wants to see anyone injured playing baseball, the game we love," the company said in a statement. "But injuries do occur in sports. While unfortunate, these are accidents. We sympathize with Steven and his family, but our bat is not to blame for his injury."

Stephen Keener, president and chief executive officer of Little League Baseball, declined to comment on the Domaleski lawsuit, but issued a statement that said the organization "stands by its safety record, and we continue to make the safety of all Little Leaguers our highest priority."

On its website, Little League denied that metal bats are riskier. "Little League International does not accept the premise that the game will be safer if played exclusively with wood, simply because there are no facts -- none at all -- to support that premise," the organization wrote.

The New Jersey Chapter of the American College of Cardiology issued a statement yesterday calling for the use of wooden bats or metal bats specially designed to reduce the speed of the ball.

In April, a professor from the New Jersey Institute of Technology said his research found that balls hit by aluminum bats traveled 20- to 30-percent faster than those hit by wooden ones. - *By Joe Malinconico, The Star Ledger, May 20, 2008*

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