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Wrong points of emphasis

By Glenn Nelson
HoopGurlz

Fussing and fighting. Benches clearing, fingers pointing and stories flying. This is the stuff that puts the madness into March.

And we're talking about the finals of a national, Christian-based high school girls' basketball tournament.



The ugly scene at the end of Saturday's NCSAA Division 1A championship cannot diminish the courage in girls' basketball exhibited by the likes of Alexis Perry of Brea Olinda (Brea, Calif.), which had its national championship hopes dashed last weekend.

What's next? A puppy beatdown at an event sponsored by the Humane Society?

Just when you think you've seen it all, just when you think adults and teenagers alike could not possibly become more unglued over perceived or self-imposed pressure, along comes Potter's House Christian (Jacksonville, Fla.) vs. Riverdale Baptist (Upper Marlboro, Md.) in the Division 1A championship of the National Christian Schools Athletic Association in Erie, Pa., last Saturday.

This much was evident in an Internet stream of the game on iHigh.com: During the final minutes of a showdown between two of the country's finest teams, Christian or not, the play becomes rough and one of the players starts jawing at the opposing bench. Neither coaches nor game officials intervene. Meanwhile, according to witnesses, heated words are exchanged between adults near the scorer's table. Suddenly, both benches empty, melee ensues and officials disqualify both teams with Potter's House leading 68-50.

It is an ugly, unconscionable scene, one that Riverdale coach Diane Richardson rightfully says "leaves a black mark on our sport." Yet it is one becoming all too familiar in a sport involving young people at a most critical stage of their development. So many black marks eventually become a black hole down which we plunge our girls, imbuing them not with a sense of empowerment, but of misplaced ambition and inappropriate rage.

Over a decade ago, I ran as fast and as far away as I could from the big-money, big-ego world of NBA basketball. My retreat landed me in girls' basketball -- the last innocent place in sports, or so I thought. Turns out, it can be an even more inexplicably devious place, where the adults are more childish than the children, the stakes are trumped up and imagined (show me the money, after all) and the rankings and competition are played out in zero-sum fashion ("my girl/team is better because your girl/team sucks").

Year after year, we see it escalating: Parents screaming at coaches, coaches screaming at players, everyone screaming at the referees -- and, it seems, each other. I've taken to plugging into my iPod when I photograph games on the baseline, the better to block out the increasing volume and violence, and preserve the fantasy of a sugar-and-spice haven.

It is in the din of controversy, however, that we ponder the role we play in the discord. We do rankings at ESPN HoopGurlz because we know sports fans demand context and order, and we want people here because we want to expose them to the thousands of girls, their hard work and accomplishments. We take it all seriously because we believe doing so rightly helps legitimize the effort the girls expend and supports their right to dream big and reach high.

We could stop doing rankings. One of my colleagues on Monday suggested we vacate the top spot in the Powerade Fab 50 and start the rankings at No. 2. Not a bad idea. Truth is, people would just start going elsewhere, and that would diminish our ability to present the positive and courageous stuff that goes on in our sport on a daily basis.

So we're going to do what we've always done -- emphasize the positive, but expose fraud and hypocrisy. Because we're all coaches, we emphasize traits in our prospect rankings that most coaches value on any level -- leadership, work ethic and citizenship. In a word, character. We feel it's time to demand accountability in the team environment as well. Call it sportsmanship. We will start taking it into consideration because no team is worthy of being considered a champion without it.

Period.

It could be argued that the double disqualification in Saturday's NCSAA Division 1A championship could be viewed as a "no contest," as in it never happened. But it did, and we believe there should be real consequences for what occurred. So we are taking the result literally, the disqualifications tantamount to being forfeits, and assigning each team a loss, effectively eliminating both from consideration for a high, final ranking in the Fab 50.

This year, we've seen more wheeling and dealing, more gamesmanship and more self-imposed pressure, all in pursuit of something we've termed a "mythical national championship." We call it that for a reason. Because it doesn't really exist to be pursued. It's something that should be earned incidentally, after a season focused on teamwork, excellence and effort, fair play and, yes, sportsmanship.

Anything less, really, is a black mark against our sport and therefore nothing to be rewarded.

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