

# Dealing with Out-of-control Fans

BY JOHN UNDERWOOD

You deserve what you accept – that is a prevention standard that unfortunately is absolutely true. The second reality is that once a negative behavior is accepted as normative behavior, it accelerates to the next level. At that point, it is much more difficult to change.

Foul language, chants, taunting, interfering with a contest, fan rivalry conflict and irrational acts are quite common at athletic venues today. No one should have to simply put up with such behaviors.

The privilege of attending a game or contest has been challenged in recent years by the increasing perception that the purchase of a ticket somehow entitles the holder to any choice of behaviors, including many behaviors of concern.

The problem of negative fan behavior has reached levels of concern in all sport venues and needs to be seriously addressed. The American Athletic Institute through its mandated high school chemical-health program, "Life of an Athlete," suggested a yellow card/red card warning system for any individual or group that vio-

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Photo provided by Elyria P.S., Arizona Interscholastic Association



lates the fan standards of behavior at an athletic contest. (Fan behavioral expectations or privileges should be posted on the school district's Web site and at venues). The original basis for this concept is unknown but certainly deserves credit for originality and content. These cards can be wallet-size and easy to remove and use.

The response in New York was immediate and highly successful. This simple, non-confrontational method of addressing out-of-character behaviors has helped establish decency and clear and consistent boundaries for behavior that ensures positive environments for any youth community setting. A school district or sport league logo may be added to the cards to indicate the authority of a host organization.

Often, fans simply act out based on the flow of emotions taking place during a contest. Many of these disruptive individuals are oblivious to the negative ripple effect their behavior is having on those around them; however, no one should have to put up with violent, disruptive, expletive or out-of-character behaviors while they are spectators at any youth community setting.

A simple strategy modeled after the red card/yellow card system and used in the sport of soccer, is a highly successful deterrent for such behaviors.

These cards were issued statewide during the first year of the New York State Public High School Athletic Association's "Life of an Athlete" program. At the annual state athletic directors meeting the following year, most athletic directors said they used the yellow card, but only two indicated they had used the red card.

Another aspect of this successful approach is that it is non-confrontational. Certainly, from a liability standpoint, we must have someone supervising an athletic contest. Often it is not an individual who has a high level of authority within the school district. This can potentially be a powder keg in the worst way. When an individual simply walks up into the stands and hands you "the card," your options are in play.

Quite simply, the message, context and delivery of that message to an out-of-control fan gives that individual or group of individuals three options: 1) They can cease the behavior of concern, 2) they can leave the venue or 3) they can be made to leave. In this day of cell phones, the next level of authority is just a phone call away. Your local police, SRO or law enforcement should also be made aware of the implementation of this program so that they may respond appropriately and timely.

The feedback from many is that the message written by youth for spectators is the most powerful part of the message. I would have to agree. Most out-of-control spectators simply get lost in the emotions of the moment.

### Spinoffs

The village of Hoosick Falls, New York took this concept to the next level by instituting the yellow card/red card system village-

wide, for all youth venues, as part of a community-wide code of conduct for youth and adults. They presented the impact of that program at the Department of Justice's National Leadership Conference in 2008.

Many referee and officiating associations have utilized these cards and have actually stopped contests to hand cards to out-of-control fans. The National Field Hockey Coaches Association approached the American Athletic Institute in 2009 to ask for these card templates. ☉

### Yellow Cards:



### Red Cards:



*Try it, Use it... it Works.*

A former NCAA All-American, international-level distance runner and World Masters Champion, John Underwood has coached or advised more than two dozen Olympians, including world and Olympic champions. He holds three International Olympic Solidarity diplomas for coaching and has been a crusader for drug-free sport at all levels. Underwood's innovative program, "The Life of an ATHLETE," has gained international prominence. He is the chemical-health consultant for the New York State Public High School Athletic Association drug-prevention program.