

THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF NACDA AND ITS AFFILIATES

ATHLETICS

ADMINISTRATION

CHANGING THE GAME

65
HP



...

+LEVEL 8



A NEW AGE IN
COLLEGE
ATHLETICS

DECEMBER 2017 | Volume 52 | Issue 4

IN THIS ISSUE

- How eSports have started to change the landscape of today's athletics department
- Improving a program's character and team chemistry through the Restorative Sportsmanship Initiative
- New technology in video production on campus

A NEW PARADIGM FOR RESPONDING TO ATHLETICS AND SPORTSMANSHIP VIOLATIONS:

A RESTORATIVE SANCTIONING APPROACH

RESTORATIVE PRACTICES AND ATHLETICS VIOLATIONS

For the past 30 years the concept of restorative justice practices has found its way into justice systems, schools, and recently, university disciplinary systems as an effective tool in responding to a host of campus-related misconduct issues. Evidenced-based research reveals that restorative practices frequently demonstrate significant gains in their effectiveness in addressing violations over traditional due process-oriented approaches. Given the efficacy of these practices; they are now finding their way into athletics venues. Perhaps the best way to describe what restorative practices are is through a story.

A RESTORATIVE PRACTICE IN ATHLETICS CASE STUDY

The story opens with an off-field incident that involved 15 student-athletes in a Power Five football program who had forged doctors' signatures in order to illegally obtain disabled parking placards. One of the early consequences for the university, the athletics department, the team and the accused student athletes included intensive national and local media coverage that occurred. As part of the university response to the violations, administrators elected to hold a restorative justice "circle" involving the offending student-athletes, disabled faculty and students, coaches, university officials, family members of the offending student-athletes, student-athletes from other athletics programs and other campus stakeholders, eventually 46 participants in all.

In the initial stage of the process the offending student-athletes spoke, emotionally detailing their realization of the impacts their transgressions had on their families, teammates and on their university. Next were several compelling narratives from disabled students, staff and faculty who spoke about the hours it took themevery day simply to prepare for, travel to and navigate the campus environment. These were followed by accounts from family members of the student-athletes, coaches, other athletics program representatives, university administrators and finally from a wide variety of voices from across the campus community. All of the stories we heard contained shared themes of concern and disappointment.

Unexpectedly, at one point the conversation turned to narratives involving racial disparities experienced by black student-athletes on campus. This conversation, while difficult, surprisingly turned out to be a turning point in the process. It proved to be a painfully important conversation that had rarely, if ever, occurred in this setting, yet was one that assisted in bringing clarity, healing and closure to a disturbing incident.

A reparative plan for the offending student-athletes emerged from this difficult conversation and was forged by a previously unlikely alliance between disabled community members and student-athletes. Now that a new and more "authentic" narrative had emerged, both groups now expressed a common interest in collaborating to bring awareness to the



Written By
THOM ALLENA, PH.D.

“ Statistics don't always tell the whole story. The view from the court, the field and the sidelines offers another lens for understanding. ”

disability issues that existed on campus and to restore balance on the campus community shaken by the misconduct. The plan recommended that the student-athletes work with disabled students to produce a documentary video through the university film school that addressed both the incident and campus-related disability issues. The film, after it was successfully completed, was then taken into classrooms across the campus. Following each video screening, a student-athlete and a disabled student led a class conversation about the incident and its learning outcomes. This conversation continued outside the classroom as well. Disabled students and student-athletes hosted informal exchanges with students, faculty and staff at a booth situated in the center of campus. Each of these engagement venues served as an opportunity to both bring a heightened awareness of campus disability issues and to creatively redress the splitting in the university community resulting from the violations and subsequent media coverage of them. Rather than remain passive participants in a disciplinary process, student-athletes became engaged actors in rebuilding the trust with their community that had been earlier lost through their transgressions.

What was perhaps most remarkable was the fact that healing and learning for many were

rooted in the complexity of the violation itself. Rather than remaining a stigma for the student-athletes and the larger campus community, the violation served as an opportunity for unification, growth and change; in effect, wholeness emerged directly from a previous act marked by shame. Contrary to several mainstream values and beliefs associated with American culture, our greatest opportunities for growth and renewal often co-exist in a direct relationship with our personal shortcomings and failures.

SPORTSMANSHIP VIOLATIONS IN COLLEGIATE ATHLETICS TODAY

As sportsmanship violations today in collegiate sports seem to be trending upward, it is reasonable to ask whether our current disciplinary responses to these incidents are the most effective means through which to reach those who violate sportsmanship codes of conduct. During the recent academic year, the Mountain West Conference discovered that it had experienced a significant increase in sportsmanship violations over the previous year's figures (Mountain West Sportsmanship Incident Count, 2017).

Whether the increase in sportsmanship violations experienced by Mountain West Conference officials is phenomenon unique to their conference or part of a larger trend has yet to be determined. This rise in

sportsmanship violations Mountain West officials theorize is associated with several factors. First, conference officials believe they are diligent in tracking and immediately responding to sportsmanship violations. Clearly, they take this responsibility seriously. For example, the conference records and tracks ejections and automatic suspensions as prescribed by NCAA playing rules that most other conferences do not take into account. Next, it's important to understand a similar rise in interpersonal violations within the larger campus community reflective in incidents of bullying, incivility and conflict among university administrators, faculty, staff and students on college campuses nationally (Hollis, 2015; Scanlon, 2017) and is further pervasive today across contemporary American society.

Statistics don't always tell the whole story. The view from the court, the field

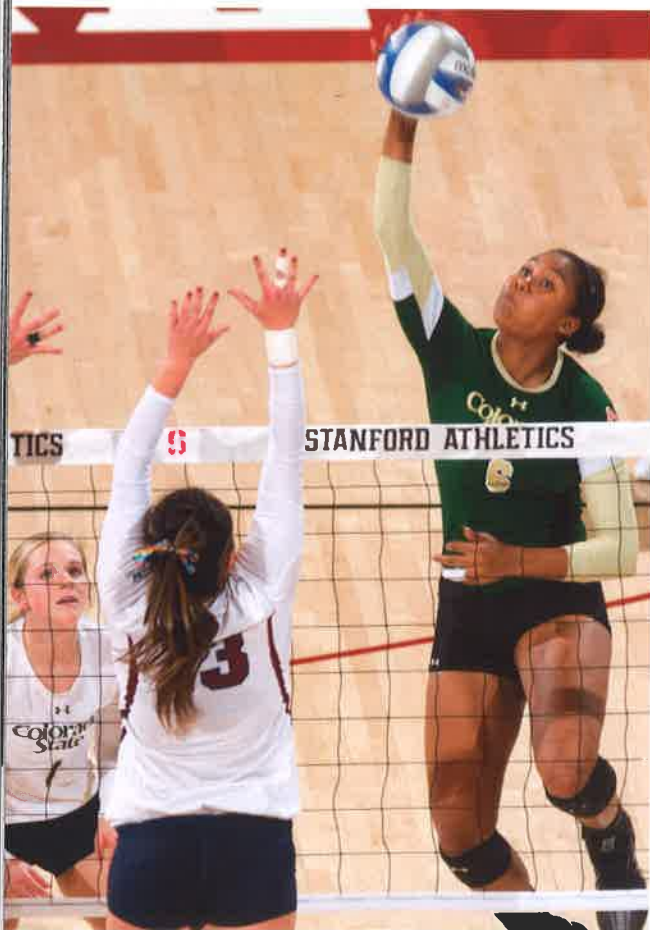
and the sidelines offers another lens for understanding what may contribute to the current rise in sportsmanship violations. Mackenzie Robinson, a student-athlete, member of the University of Nevada women's soccer team and a member of the Mountain West Conference Student-Athletic Advisory Committee, relates that she has seen a marked increase in intensity on the field recently and offered this perspective: "Once one hard foul occurs in a match, it seems what happens next is foul after foul. At that point things seem to be getting out of hand." Robinson added, "Student-athletes from both teams tend to shirk the responsibility for managing match intensity onto the officials when it should be a responsibility shared by all of us."

It's worth noting that Robinson's view regarding the growing intensity also mirrors comments voiced by conference athletics directors, other athletics administrators and student-athletes during their recent Joint Council Meeting where they discussed their concerns about not only what is happening on the field but also in their perceptions of a growing hostility in the stands as well. Some additional observations relating to sportsmanship issues included:

- A need for more preventative approaches to sportsmanship violations
- The importance of connecting expectations on and off the field that align with organization mission and values
- The impact that a divisive time in our country has on crowds at athletics events
- Growing hostility among competitive fan bases
- The impact of social media
- Preferential treatment of high-profile violators
- Student-athletes have a significant potential role to play in addressing student peer misconduct
- Exploring the development sanctioning approaches that are educational rather than punitive

Marie Tuite, athletics director at San José State University, expressed her personal concerns about the need to balance healthy competition and healthy sportsmanship:

"The Mountain West Conference initiative (restorative sportsmanship) focuses on the acknowledgement of personal responsibility and character development in supporting respectful sportsmanship. The balance between healthy competition and sportsmanship is often discussed. It's an unhealthy attitude that weaves itself





for addressing the league's sportsmanship violations. Given the previously mentioned spike in violations, Gilliland from time to time questions the overall effectiveness of the current sanctioning approach he is responsible for overseeing. He wonders whether top-down, "punitive" approaches are the most effective means for changing behavior of student-athletes and coaches particularly given the contemporary pressures associated with Division I athletics. Also, are these sanctioning processes consistent with larger Mountain West Conference philosophy that in part aims to: "foster intercollegiate athletics programs in a manner that will enhance the academic advancement, character development, athletics potentials and the well-being of student-athletes" (Philosophy of the Mountain West Conference).

Another limitation associated with the sanctioning approach involves the belief that the process in its current form

has become fairly impersonal with little or no direct engagement between conference officials and those who are the subject of a disciplinary action. Instead, communication with offenders has been reduced to an email containing a form letter describing the rule violation and its presumptive penalty. Still further, this email is often passed through several administrative and coaching channels before it actually reaches the person(s) being disciplined, leaving conference officials to wonder whether the message associated with disciplinary action is not sometimes lost somewhere in translation.

RESTORATIVE PRACTICES: CHANGING RESPONSES TO SPORTSMANSHIP VIOLATIONS

Perhaps one of the keys to shifting an escalating trend in sportsmanship violations lies in redefining what is meant by the term "accountability." This is one of the stated or implied goals of any disciplinary and justice-related process, which nearly every procedural process is modeled after and includes: an offense followed by a fact-finding process to determine guilt or innocence and, when guilt is determined, a prescribed sanction, often punitive, is administered.

In a restorative approach, violators are asked to consider the range of impacts

their actions have on others and themselves. For those who violate, participation in this disciplinary approach shifts from a traditionally passive role to one where they are invited to actively engage, reflect, learn and grow from their transgressions. Sitting out games is replaced by proactive actions that repair harm and rebuild the trust lost as a natural consequence of the unsporting behavior. For most athletics administrators, these outcomes are more closely aligned with the educational missions of their own institutions with the stated philosophies of most athletics conferences as well.

In an effort to counter their violation trend, the Mountain West Conference is exploring the use of what conference officials are calling a Restorative Sportsmanship Initiative. This approach builds on restorative principles and practices that hold that unsporting behavior represents more than simply a violation of conference rules or sportsmanship codes of conduct. Sportsmanship violations also represent breaches in relationship on multiple levels: personal, interpersonal and collective that also warrant attention, and in some instances, require actual and symbolic repair of these fissures. These responses assume a variety of reparative forms. Some restorative responses may be as simple as an apology to those who have been impacted, while in more complex violations having widespread impacts and multiple impacted parties, a restorative circle as described earlier may be more appropriate.

THE PATH FORWARD

In early summer of 2017, Mountain West Conference officials initiated a series of conversations regarding restorative sportsmanship with a number of their primary constituents including: the 12 university presidents who comprise their Board of Directors, athletics directors, senior woman administrators, SAAC members, faculty athletic representatives and senior officials of the Mountain West Conference.

While no restorative sportsmanship policies have been developed, nor have any strategies been implemented as of this writing, the conversations have had their impacts. Since discussion of restorative sportsmanship, a number of restorative indicators have emerged both in the sportsmanship space and in dealing with larger social justice issues. "Emergence" is a concept borrowed from complexity theory that recognizes innovation as a predictable response to system stagnation and signals major social and institutional shifts. Consider these random and unplanned occurrences that have "emerged" since the beginning of the new athletics year in the Mountain West Conference.

— A footnote to Robinson's story: During a recent match a teammate came to her defense after a hard foul was committed, and her teammate received a red card for

into unsportsmanlike conduct and behavior. College athletics is family entertainment and each and every one of our student-athletes, coaches and most importantly, our fans must be committed to creating "fan friendly" environments."

LIMITATIONS OF CURRENT SPORTSMANSHIP SANCTIONING

In collegiate athletics, sanctions imposed on those who violate codes of conduct are often best defined by a specific loss. For student-athletes, it can involve the loss of playing time and possible suspension or expulsion from their team. For a coach, the loss may represent money in the form of a fine imposed. For athletics programs, violations may result in the loss of athletics scholarships and the loss of recruiting opportunities. These are punitive measures that research suggests do not always translate into behavior change and resiliency. A higher correlation for behavior change involves the personal understanding of the effects of one's actions and creates sanctions that directly redress the harms associated with them. Moreover, a process that requires active rather than docile participation, one that moves beyond passive compliance into "engaged accountability."

Bret Gilliland, deputy commissioner of the Mountain West Conference, is responsible

her actions. As both teams were leaving the field of play after the match, one of the opposing players involved in the incident approached Robinson and her teammate and apologized for her part in the incident.

- On September 29, in his response to racial slurs left on the dormitory message boards of five black cadet candidates, incoming Air Force Academy Superintendent, Lt. General Silveria addressed the entire Academy community and in a strongly worded rebuke of racism, misogyny and other forms of bigotry, he offered what he referred to as a “better idea” – specifically he stressed the importance of civil discourse and dialogue in addressing social justice issues.
- On October 2, the Associated Press reported that San Diego State running back Rashad Penny received an apology from the Northern Illinois player who had gouged his right eye during a game on September 30. In a subsequent conversation with the NIU player, Penny spoke about the apology he received: “He was very sincere. He was very straightforward. The head coach was too... There’s really no reason to hold grudges with anyone.”
- In mid-October, a Mountain West coach received sportsmanship sanctions for actions during a contest. In a display of professionalism and accountability, the coach accepted responsibility for the choices made and apologized for the conduct.
- Recently, social justice and first amendment expression of free speech issues have found their way into several athletics venues. For example, recently, five members of the University of New Mexico football team elected to take a knee rather than stand during the performance of the national anthem. In the days that followed, UNM Interim President, Chaouki Abdallah met with the some of the players of the UNM football team. In a statement to the Albuquerque Journal on October 4, he expressed the following:

“While some may or may not agree with the message, I fully support our student-athletes and their right to peacefully and legally express themselves. As an educational institution, we take every opportunity to learn and educate, and I hope that our community will appreciate that role and continue to help us bring our people together.”

President Abdallah has since put his words into action as he has initiated plans for a restorative dialogue session that will involve student-athletes, members of various on-campus veterans organizations, athletics administrators and other relevant stakeholders to discuss, reflect and learn as a community from the aforementioned incident.

According to Gilliland, the Mountain West Conference remains greatly interested in Restorative Sportsmanship as a potential future direction to better address conduct by coaches, student-athletes and (by extension) fans than the traditional top-down, punitive model. The conference is forming a Task Force from a broad range of league constituents to develop a recommended approach for consideration by the conference’s Board of Directors. For the Mountain West Conference and its member institutions, the restorative sportsmanship conversation continues to move forward. ●

Thom Allena, Ph.D. is a community and organizational psychologist and the Managing Partner of Thom Allena Associates, a firm nationally known for its collaborative and restorative approaches to transformative change in communities and organizations. Dr. Allena has consulted with numerous universities and their athletics programs across the country and is also the co-author of “Restorative Justice on the College Campus: Promoting Student Growth and Responsibility and Reawakening the Spirit of the Campus Community.” He also teaches in the Peace and Global Justice Studies Program at the University of New Mexico.

