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# Getting a Grip on Fan Behavior in College Sports

There is something very wrong taking place in sports, including college sports.

It isn't universal. It doesn't happen all the time.

But it happens often enough to suggest that we — the fans — are losing our way.

Imagine you are playing before several thousand on the road in a conference game that is nationally televised and being singled out with words like “traitor,” “liar,” and other, more crude, epithets.

Imagine having your family subjected to hearing vulgarities that should never be spoken in the arena directed at you but shouted to them.

Imagine having your mother doused with ice water, your father's sexual orientation called into question and your family assaulted with flying debris.

And imagine that the target of all this hatred and abuse is not some hardened professional who willingly gives as bad as he receives. Instead, the target is an 18-year-old freshman, thrilled to be playing for his team and excited to be a part of college basketball.

These are the facts in two instances that made headlines across the country last spring when Indiana University's Eric Gordon played on the road at the University of Illinois and UCLA's Kevin Love played in a conference match-up at the University of Oregon.

Gordon was singled out because he had verbally committed to playing basketball at Illinois and then changed his mind. And Love — who played high school basketball in Oregon and was the son of a former Oregon basketball standout — left his home state to play for the Bruins.

That's it. Those were the sins for which they were visited with abuse.

Frankly, the insults heaped on these two student-athletes far exceeded anything I am willing to repeat here. They were verbally, and in the case of Gordon physically, assaulted. It was ugly and vicious.

And all this took place on the campuses of two of America's greatest institutions of higher education.

What is going on? As we enter another basketball season, what has gone wrong? Fans cheering and jeering has, in some cases, gone beyond what is tolerable.

For a culture that holds dear the concepts of fair play, civility, honest effort — in short, sportsmanship — intercollegiate athletics at times sure has a strange way of showing its commitment to such values. And fans — both students and others — are moving quickly in some cases from loyal fanatics to out-of-control mobs.

Campuses increasingly have student sections in football and basketball that have taken on the role of ensuring a home court advantage with zealous enthusiasm that sometimes moves from rowdy support to over-the-top vulgarity and violent action. Worse, there are administrators and coaches who judiciously look the other way for fear of dampening the enthusiasm that could give an edge to their teams.

After one of the instances noted above, the coach reportedly praised the home crowd for its enthusiasm! That's simply unacceptable!!

Let me be clear.

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These behaviors represent a threat to the integrity of intercollegiate athletics. Rule by mob will as quickly undo the role intercollegiate athletics plays in the national sports culture.

It's time to address this rising problem. We had better get a grip on fan behavior.

The involvement in intercollegiate athletics as student-athlete or fan is often an emotional experience.

The deep passion of playing or supporting a team is part of what makes college sports so attractive. But just as important as expressing the passion for a team is learning the limits of being a true fan.

Some professional teams have taken an interesting approach to fan behavior that becomes out of line. They have posted a number that anyone can call on their cell from their seat to advise venue management of such behavior. A representative of the home team will then show up and, if necessary, escort the offender from the stands and in some cases remove their season tickets.

It may be time for colleges and universities to adopt a similar approach.

For all the concern that instances like those at Illinois and Oregon raised a year ago, there is much encouragement to be taken from another moment in college sports when the student-athletes turned a difficult moment into an example of how the concept of sportsmanship can soar.

In a Division II softball game between conference rivals Western Oregon and Central Washington last spring, and with two of her teammates on base, WOU's senior Sara Tucholsky hit what appeared to be her first-ever home run. Watching her fence-clearing shot, she missed first base, turned abruptly to go back and touch the bag when her knee buckled and she fell to the ground in pain. Crawling back to first, she realized she could go no further.

According to the rules, she could not be helped by her teammates; and if she could not continue around the bases, her hit would be recorded as a single. Western Washington's Mallory Holtman, a power-hitting first baseman with many home runs to her credit, asked if it was against the rules for her and one of her teammates to carry their opponent around the bases so she would get credit for the home run. She was told that it was not, and they did, and Western Oregon went on to defeat Central Washington.

Holtman had a simple reason for her display of sportsmanship in helping Tucholsky round the bases: "She hit it over the fence. She deserved it."

Ironically, among the many letters and e-mails of thanks and tribute that Holtman received, were some that accused her of being selfish and not thinking of their teammates. Seriously, in the midst of an inspiring act of pure sportsmanship, there still are those who entirely miss the lesson.

Such fan behavior deserves only one response.

Get a grip.