



How Can We Honor the Game When the Opponent Does Not?

This resource stems from a question submitted to the Ask PCA blog. Responses come from our experts including PCA Trainers, who lead live group workshops for coaches, parents, administrators and student-athletes.

“In our indoor soccer league (multi-town – so no guarantee of program consistency), we played an opponent that wasn’t honoring the game. One of their players frequently fouled our players, trying to elicit a response and ‘trash talking.’ One of our team parents asked, ‘How can we respect an opponent that doesn’t respect us, the rules, or the officials?’ I was hard pressed to answer. Any advice on how to handle?”

PCA Response by Joe Scally, PCA Trainer–Chicago

When an opponent does not Honor the Game, it takes moral courage for your players to do so, anyway. Players demonstrate this moral courage by staying true to themselves, playing hard, and showing respect... even for the player who is trash talking. When players show self-respect by rising above the situation, they have an Honoring the Game experience that will be of value to them in many areas of their lives.

We show respect first and foremost because it is the right thing to do. Showing respect also helps us become better as people and as competitors. Your opponent was trying to throw your players off their game. Coaching them to follow the rules and respect the officials helped your players stay focused, an important skill for any athlete to develop.

I asked my daughter, who plays college soccer, about your question. She has developed a mindset for dealing with opponents who foul and trash-talk, telling herself that her opponent must be doing this because the opponent doesn’t feel she can outplay my daughter. This motivates my daughter to work harder within the rules to show that she is the better player that day. My daughter’s mindset helps her focus on the game and avoid being sucked into the trash-talking and fouling mode, which would keep her away from playing her best.

Prepare your players during practice for provocative opponents. Have a team discussion where individual players share ways that they stay focused. Praise any player who maintains focus despite being fouled. Ask players to role-play trash talking in the controlled setting of practice to immunize other players against this tactic.

Then talk to the team about what they experienced. Give your players tips on maintaining self-control by doing things like walking away, focusing on winning the next 50-50 ball, and reminding teammates to stay cool.

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How Can We Honor the Game When the Opponent Does Not?, continued

Devoting time to these things helps you develop a culture where players understand that Honoring the Game is just the right thing to do. Tell parents what you are teaching and why it is important. This will help everyone involved to model good behavior and support the players in becoming better competitors.

Finally, you can remind your team how a World Cup championship outcome might have been different if Zinedine Zidane had ignored some trash talking!

PCA Trainer Joe Scally is a longtime soccer coach based in the Chicago area. Joe spent several years as PCA's national director of training.

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