

# The Creation of Fair-Play Sporting Divisions in Newfoundland & Labrador High School Sports

By Ian Davidson  
iandavidson@esdnl.ca

Twelve students are chosen for a high school basketball team, but only eight play...ever. With the exception of a few minutes at the end of a game easily won against weaker opponents, they simply do not play. How is this fair to the four athletes who spend their season on the bench?

Situations such as this have prompted coaches, school administrators and parents to question what is gained and, more importantly, what is lost when children make a team and do not play. In 2003, School Sports Newfoundland & Labrador (SSNL) adopted a fourth high school sporting division for the sports of volleyball and basketball, the "Fair-Play" division.

This article is based on personal observations over the course of the program that highlight key elements about why I believe this program is so successful. Specifically created to address inequity of playing time among athletes and to promote the concept of sportsmanship, the Fair-Play division was an immediate success on the provincial sporting scene. Each Fair-Play tournament had the maximum number of teams participate and attracted teams from all regions of the province. Its subsequent success has proven that Fair-Play sporting competitions are viable alternatives to traditional athletic events and strongly contribute to the development of healthy self-esteem and appropriate societal values in student-athletes.

## Evolution of Fair-Play Sport

The term "Fair-Play" in sport has several meanings. The Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport (2005) believes that promoting respect for sport, respect for others and not using performance-enhancing drugs to gain an advantage over the competition all contribute to the definition of "playing fair". For the purposes of this article however, I will use the term "Fair-Play" to refer to athletic events that require, essentially, an equal amount of playing time be given to all members of a participating team.

## Here's how it works

Schools have until February 1st to declare their intention to participate in either the regular or the Fair-Play division. If schools choose to compete in the Fair-Play division, all games played after February 1st must provide equal playing time to all members of the team in preparation for regional play-downs. Also, schools large enough to field two teams can have a team in the Fair-Play and regular divisions with the only stipulation being that athletes must choose which team they join as no overlap of athletes is permitted. These tournaments presented schools in

*Ian Davidson is currently the Assistant Principal of Clarendville High School and lives in Clarendville, NL with his wife Janice and daughters Morgan and Mya. Ian is a graduate of Memorial University of Newfoundland where he studied Physical Education and he completed graduate studies in Education Administration at the University of Lethbridge.*

Newfoundland and Labrador with an opportunity to attend regional and, if successful, provincial tournaments where all athletes could look forward to playing.

With the success of the Fair-Play divisions, other provinces in Canada are now starting to take notice and are requesting information on the structure of the Fair-Play tournaments. Recently, representatives from British Columbia and Ontario made contact with SSNL to get additional details on the structure of our fair-play divisions and the associated rules for participation. It appears that Fair-Play sporting competitions are here to stay in Newfoundland and Labrador, and in the near future may become significant aspects of the high school sports scene in other Canadian provinces.

## Self-Esteem Development

Having been involved with coaching high school athletes for over ten years, I have had the misfortune of watching hundreds of children languish on the bench for entire tournaments where they

never once get on the floor. I can remember a tournament in New Brunswick where two athletes played cards at the end of the bench during a game which was being won easily by their team. I was shocked to later discover that for that particular coach, "rookies" never got on the floor barring multiple injuries, and they had to pay their dues sitting on the bench for a year before having the chance to join the regular rotation. In professional basketball this type of coaching philosophy may be appropriate, but not in high school.

**Athletes need to play to improve and when a coach makes a commitment to excluding children until a certain age regardless of their ability level, it can have negative consequences.**

Athletes need to play to improve and when a coach makes a commitment to excluding children until a certain age regardless of their ability level, it can have negative consequences. Bennett (1998) argues that when children have a chance to participate and contribute equally to both victories and defeats, they grow as athletes and individuals. Children feel like part of the team when they play and do not end up playing cards or resorting to other distractions that indicate they are not focused on the game.

In fair-play sporting competitions, the types of pressures on players and coaches shift. Players are still expected to perform well on the court. However, they no longer have the added pressure of thinking they may be benched if they do not play well. All things being equal, several participating coaches in the Fair-Play division indicated that coaching in a Fair-Play tournament is tougher because they must make use of all their players and not depend on a strong starting five to win. It has been my experience that juggling line-ups to meet with maximum success in a game is not an easy task and adds pressure of a different variety to coaching.

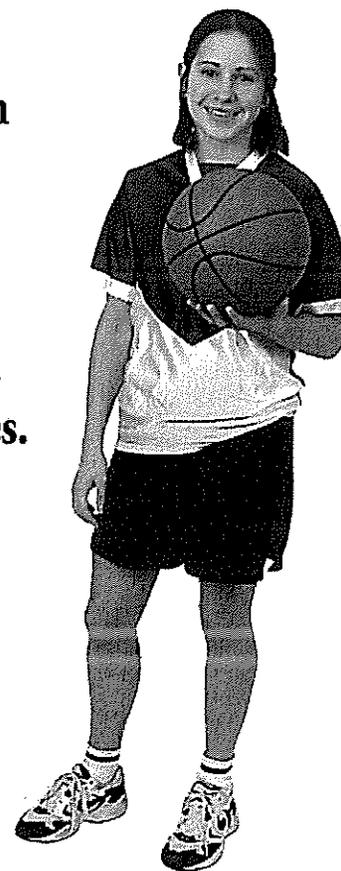
### **Reinforcement of Socially Desirable Values**

Sports, particularly those that involve significant physical contact, are often perceived negatively in our society. Levin & Smith (1995) believe that a growing segment of society is convinced that

violence in sport equates to violence in life and strongly feel that we are teaching athletes the wrong values. Fair-play participation in any sport presents an alternative model through the active promotion of socially desirable values. Although participation in Fair-Play sports could help develop many positive values, this article will focus on the following: tolerance, respect and teamwork.

### **Tolerance**

Teenagers can be cruel, reducing peers and parents to tears in very short order at times. This disturbing behaviour can often be attributed to a lack of tolerance for fellow teenagers and their attitudes or behaviour. Participation in Fair-Play sports demands that athletes accept the mistakes of their peers on the floor while they sit on the bench. Instead of pleading with the coach to put them back in the game, their efforts are instead directed toward helping teammates learn from their errors as they know they cannot simply take their place on the floor. Often, the end result is the removal of envy and jealousy – which can be poisons to the spirit of a team. Instead, it engenders a committed effort to make one's teammates perform well. Through the sharing of playing time and encouraged support of their peers, fair-play athletes learn to develop and value all significant relationships, including those with teammates, coaches, teachers, and parents. To this end, the development of tolerance is highly desirable not only in the sporting world but also in life.



### **Respect**

A significant aspect of the SSNL Fair-Play sporting model is the development of respect for coaches, teammates, opponents and referees. The Canadian Minor Hockey Association has been running a series of provocative television ads over the past few years that highlight the need for parents to "lighten up" and let their children enjoy the game. In these advertisements, children are shown encouraging their parents to "beat the snot out of ..." other parents and to "not be such sissies" during routine life situations. While these ads are meant to shock their audience, their intended message of sports'personship and respect is quite serious. Sports'personship is respect for oneself and others. It is a demonstration of generosity and genuine concern for others, a constant measure of the players' understanding and commitment to fair play, ethical behaviour and integrity. It is being fair and generous; a good loser and a graceful winner. Developing respect for others involved in a sport through a system of equal participation removes the temptation to exclude certain athletes in the pursuit of success at all costs.

## Teamwork

Fair-Play sports encourages athletes to play as a team because all players must play during the course of a game. Historically, few championships have been won on the back of a single player. Michael Jordan had Scottie Pippen in Chicago and won six NBA championships. Jordan moved to Washington and when forced to shoulder the load alone could not produce a championship. Wayne Gretzky had both Mark Messier and Jari Kurri in Edmonton and won four Stanley Cups. When Gretzky moved to Los Angeles without his highly effective teammates, even "The Great One" could not win the coveted Cup again. While the NBA and NHL are hardly examples of Fair-Play sporting leagues, nevertheless they do illustrate a concept central to the development of teamwork in Fair-Play athletes: few, if any, significant outcomes are ever accomplished alone, and by learning to

play as a team you greatly increase your chances of success and winning that elusive championship. Many athletes who learn to rely on and trust others for support develop into effective leaders in life who recognize and affirm the success of others without any sense of discrediting themselves.

The development of a Fair-Play sporting division in Newfoundland & Labrador high school athletics was a necessary complement to the traditional sporting structure. For the vast majority, the culmination of high school sports represents the end of their competitive sporting days. The elite few, who go on to play at the university level or professionally, are the only athletes who derive long-term benefits from our existing sporting structure. They are given more time to hone their skills on the court to the detriment of their peers sitting on the bench, and they may benefit from the increased exposure to

scouts who watch the games. Fair-Play sporting competitions, however, allow athletes to develop similar skills and strategies as their counterparts who participate in traditional sporting competitions without the potentially negative drawbacks. Athletes raised in a Fair-Play system learn to work as a team to achieve goals and can all take pride in knowing they shared in the success. More importantly, it is my experience that Fair-Play sport produces quality human beings both on and off the playing field. ■

## References

- Bennett, L. (1998). A New Game Plan. *Teaching Tolerance*, 7(2), 21-27. Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport. Retrieved April 28, 2005, from <http://www.cces.ca>
- Levin, D.S & Smith, E.A. (1995). Violence and high school sports participation. *Pediatric Exercise Science*, 7(4), 379-388.

# Sauter-Santé à travers le Canada!



**À vos cordes!**

**Votre école pourra bientôt relever le  
Défi national aux écoles  
Sauter-Santé à travers le Canada.**

**Préparez-vous à faire le saut  
le jeudi 23 février 2006.**



Inscrivez-vous à partir du site [www.cahperd.ca/definational](http://www.cahperd.ca/definational)