

Cheers or Jeers

By Reg P. Wydeven
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A few weeks ago, the Kimberly High School basketball program honored the 1991 team that qualified for the State Tournament. To commemorate the 25th anniversary of our trip to State, they held a ceremony between the JV and varsity games. Flanked by the current players, my buddies and I walked out to the center of Jack Wippich Court as the PA announcer recounted the highs and lows of that memorable season.

After the game, we went to Tanners to continue the celebration. We told old stories for the 1,000th time and laughed until our faces hurt. I recalled the time during our junior year that we played Fox Valley Lutheran in a junior reserve game on a Saturday morning. I loved playing FVL because they utilized a 2-3 zone, so that opened up 3-point shots.

Sure enough, early in the game I was wide open for a 3. Apparently I was so excited that when I launched it, the shot came up about a foot short. The half-dozen or so students at the game immediately began chanting “Airball, airball!” For the rest of the game, the fans resumed the chant each time I touched the ball. I was reluctant to jack up another shot out of fear of further ridicule. Thankfully, my love for shooting outweighed my fear of humiliation, so I kept shooting.

A quarter century later, that handful of fans could get in trouble for picking on me.

In case you haven’t heard, last month the WIAA sent out an email to member schools reminding them about the organization’s policy about sportsmanship and student section chants directed at opponents that “are clearly intended to disrespect.” The email, sent by director of communication Todd Clark, included examples of such chants, such as “You can’t do that,” “Fundamentals,” “There’s a net there,” “Sieve,” “We can’t hear you,” the “scoreboard” cheer and “season’s over” during tournament play. Also included was the infamous “airball” chant.

The policy garnered national attention after Hilbert High School three-sport athlete April Gehl was suspended for tweeting her profane reaction to the policy and was subsequently suspended for 5 basketball games. National media outlets like Sports Illustrated and ESPN criticized the policy, claiming it went too far.

Unfortunately, there have been a number of incidents at high school sporting events across the country involving players and sometimes fans that have escalated to violence. The WIAA is trying to walk the fine line between eliminating these inciting chants and maintaining the fun rivalries of high school sports.

I remember the first time I realized that a student section was not just there to spectate the game, but to actually be a part of it. I was in grade school and Kimberly was playing Kaukauna, our longtime rival. When the announcer began to introduce the Ghosts’ starting lineup, all of the members of the Kimberly student section immediately began reading newspapers and feigned disinterest. When the Papermaker players were introduced, the newspapers were thrown away and the crowd erupted in cheers. I couldn’t wait until the next time we faced Kaukauna to see how their student section would try to one-up us.

So I completely understand what the WIAA is trying to accomplish and I would hate to see a game end in violence. But in trying to legislate cheering, I fear the policy will take away a fun aspect of the game that is unique to high school sports.

At least they didn’t ban my buddy, Pearl’s, favorite cheer: U-rah-ree, kick ‘em in the knee; u-rah-rass, kick ‘em in the other knee.

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