Where have all the sportsmen gone? We looked, and this is what we found

the wrong stuff

by Sheila Sweeney

You’re having a great night. You’re in the zone. You can’t seem to miss a shot. At the end of the game, it’s easy to be a good sport. You shake the other players’ hands, celebrate with the rest of your team, and even smile at the ref. Life is good.

But what happens two weeks down the road, on that rainy night when you’re fighting off a cold, and the calls are going against you? Your teammates seem to be on a different page of the playbook, and there’s a defender stuck to you all game, talking trash in your ear. Are you a good sport then? Do you try to control the frustration you feel, or do you let your emotions boil over?

Skills can earn you respect. But skills alone won’t make you a complete—or even a respected—player. There’s a mysterious thing called sportsmanship that is valued by many and respected by more. The dictionary defines a sportsman as one who abides by the rules and accepts victory or defeat graciously.

The Decline of Sportsmanship

What has happened in sports today, when there seems to be no sportsmanlike incident every time you turn on the TV? Has sportsmanship declined? Is it the media focusing on a few bad apples? Opinions vary.

Darrell Garretson, the chief of NBA officials, singled out Jerry West, a Hall of Fame guard with the Los Angeles Lakers and now their general manager, as well as Michael Jordan and Patrick Ewing as being good sportsmen.

“They are very competitive, and sometimes it’s tough to be a good sportsman when you’re competitive,” said Garretson. “With their skills, they could have made their opponents look horrendous. But they never did [did]. That’s one of the highest aspects of a good sportsman—that you don’t look down on other people or play down to others. Sometimes people get too excited over one or two particular incidents. I don’t think that’s good for anyone.”

Lakers point guard Nick Van Exel, who was the focus of media coverage last season after a confrontation with a referee, agreed that some matters get blown out of proportion. “I made a mistake, but that doesn’t mean anything about me as a person,” he said. “I’m still one of the most-liked players around the league. So you can’t say I’m a bad person just because I messed up once. I’m a good sportsman. I love the game.”

What about the on-court celebrations that some people have criticized as being unsportsmanlike?

“If I find it absurd,” said West. “I watch players miss free throws, and the other guys are going up and shaking their hand. They should be embarrassed that they missed. I wouldn’t want somebody doing that to me.”

Van Exel had a different opinion:

“I think a lot of teams have good sportsmanship, but now it’s shown in a different manner. Now, you want to get more excited, more pumped up when you do something good. Everybody wants to do a dance, everybody wants to make a mean face and hang on the rim. But you’re not trying to disrespect anybody. You’re just having fun. You’re just doing your job, plus you’re entertaining.”

A New Attitude

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, a former Laker and the NBA’s career scoring leader, said attitudes about sportsmanship have changed.

“It starts in junior high school, where some kids don’t have to do things that everyone else has to do because they have demonstrated athletic talent. [Then,] colleges have to give them money under the table to attract them. Kids begin to develop a feeling that the rules don’t count for them, only for those who are powerless to get by them. They see a lot of things that send very bad messages.

“The tremendous entertainment dollars available to people gives them an incentive to act out. They think it increases their marketing value, and they make the highlight reel because of that. The whole climate of macho bragging that dominates the game now is very unfortunate. It has nothing to do with the game. The teams that can put that aside and concentrate on winning will do the best.”

West concurred: “There’s no question that attitudes have changed a great deal. Sports reflect what we see in society. There is more at risk today. The stakes have heightened. Pro basketball is so competitive that kids who do anything to make the league—and stay in there. We’ve seen many things that occur within the league and within our team that we don’t like. And we’re hopeful that players understand that this is something that is not acceptable.”

First, Class

Sportsmanship is more than shaking hands at the end of a game, win or lose. It’s more than not talking back to your coach, the ref, or a fan watching the game. It’s having the ability to balance your competitiveness. It’s leading your life with class, on and off the court. It’s not easy to master. You have to work at it.

There are some wonderful lessons that people can take away from losing, even when it hurts a lot,” said West. “If you lose to a team, you should be able to respect them. You hear a million excuses for losing. On that particular time when you lost, that team was either more talented, better prepared, or simply better. Congratulations those people who beat you and go back and figure out how you can improve.”

“The sense of good sportsmanship really comes from traditional American values that are taught at home,” said Abdul-Jabbar. “Such as being considerate, understanding your fellow man, and having some compassion. Even though there is a serious competition going on that you want to win, and all your instincts to dominate are given full reign, you understand that restraint is also part of the whole process and makes it balanced. If there is no restraint, then we go back to being savages.”

Added West, “There are times when you have to use incredibly good judgment. Let your discipline as an athlete help you in those situations also. Discipline is so important today, and particularly as an athlete. It can guide you through harm’s way.”

“There is nothing wrong with the drive to excel,” said Abdul-Jabbar. “But don’t let it dominate your personality. Realize that what you do as an athlete is just part of your life. Think about the big picture. It will help you become a better sport.”