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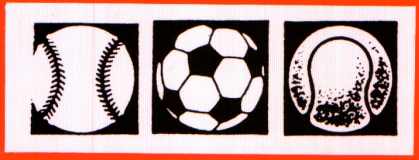

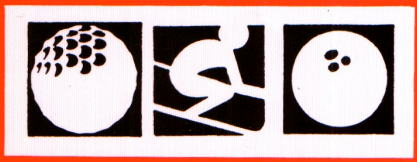

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Adult Spectator Verbal Behavior During a Mustang League World Series

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The purpose of this study was to descriptively analyze the verbal behaviors of adult spectators during a youth baseball Mustang League World Series. Within a four-day period, sixty-four adult supporters were observed during 11 games. An interval recording format was used to note the "content" and "target" of these verbalizations. Statements made by observed spectators during 10-second intervals were judged to be either positive, neutral, or negative. Additionally, notations were made of the person(s) to whom the verbalization was directed as well as whether the team the adult was supporting was ahead, behind, or tied. The gender of the subject making the statement was also noted. Results showed that spectators spent over 80% of their time doing such things as silently watching the game or chatting with friends. Also, the data indicated that when verbal comments were made, most were nuetral (9.11%) or positive (7.03%) in tone. Negative comments accounted for only 1.15% of the intervals.

Approximately 17 million American children participate in youth sport programs (Gould & Martens, 1979). Orlick and Botterill (1975) suggest that children's primary

motivations for such participation are their desires for activity and fun. Other purposes for such programs are adults' wishes to familiarize children with the fundamentals of a game and to provide them an opportunity to play in a safe and supervised manner.

However, researchers in the field frequently express serious concerns about potential detrimental effects from the stresses of competition and parental pressures assumed prevalent in youth sports (Brower, 1979; Coakley, 1986; Martens, 1980; Michener, 1976; Ogilvie, 1979; Tutko & Bruns, 1976). According to a study by Smoll and Smith (1980), youth soccer players on losing teams were considerably more likely to experience postgame stress than those on winning teams. Perhaps surprisingly, the researchers found that winning did not mean a great deal to any of the participants. However, the children did feel that winning was very important to their parents and coaches. What is more, when compared to players on the losing teams, the winning team players felt more strongly that their coaches liked them, and that their parents liked their coaches. Children often imitate the actions of adult role models and internalize attitudes they assume lie behind those actions. Adult role models play major roles in determining how children will react to competition-induced frustration and stress, and how children express feelings about their performances in the game.

Though the impact of adult spectators' verbal behaviors on children could be dramatic, few studies have focused on this element of youth sports. Forbis (1977) explored the relationship between perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors of parents while watching their children's hockey game. Graham, Raliffe, Faucette, Salter, and Walley (1982) analyzed the verbal behaviors of adult spectators attending youth baseball, soccer, and basketball games. Randall and McKenzie (in review) observed verbal behaviors of adult spectators attending youth soccer games. The purpose of this study was to descriptively

analyze the verbal behaviors of adult spectators during a highly competitive Mustang League World Series (youth baseball).

Methods

The study was conducted during a four-day Mustang League World Series for children living in Texas and Mexico. Participants in the baseball tournament were 9 or 10 years old. Each of six teams included in the program had won four tournaments preceding the World Series.

The sample of 64 adult spectators (subjectively judged to be 18 years old or older) included 35 females and 29 males. According to the organizers of the tournament, the majority of the spectators were parents or closer relatives of the participants. Four of the six teams had traveled to the tournament and were housed in a nearby hotel. Although teams were eliminated during the 4-day process, the majority of players and spectators continued to attend the World Series until after the championship game.

OBSERVATIONAL RECORDING FORM

The instrument (see Figure 1) used in this study—developed by Graham et al, (1982)—incorporated an interval recording format to note the "content" and "target" of adult spectator verbalizations. Statements made by observed spectators during 10-second intervals were judged to be either positive, neutral, or negative according to the following definitions:

> **Positive**—A statement that was supportive, encouraging, or praising (e.g. "great _____," "good _____," "you can do it," "fantastic," "way to watch the ball," "nice try," "pretty," "beautiful," "that's the way to go," "excellent," "you'll get it next time," "yeah (yes)," "all right").

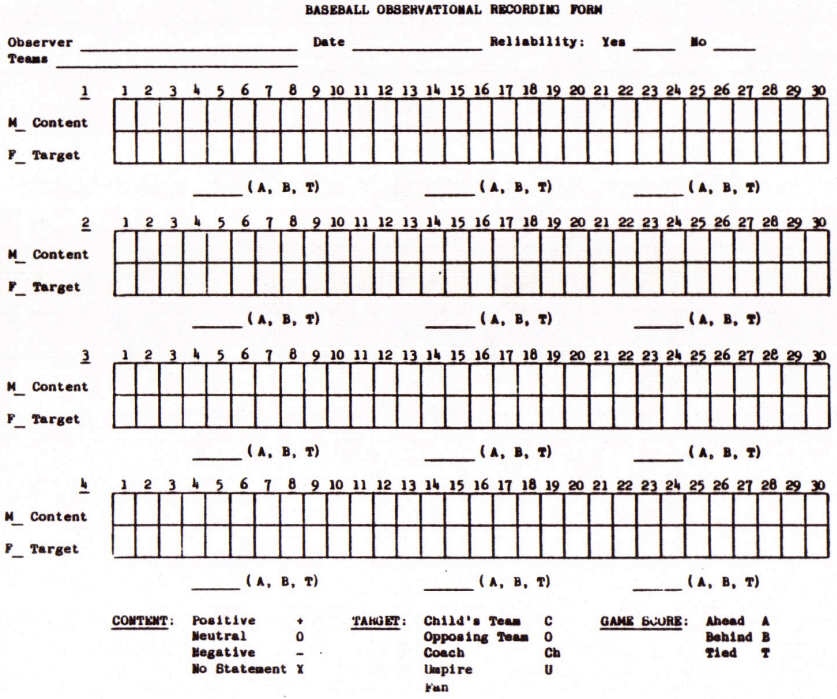

Figure 1. Baseball Observational Recording Form

Neutral—A statement that was neither supportive nor denigrating. Such statements could have been instructional or commanding with no positive or negative implications (e.g. "O.K.," "let's go," "come on," "run hard," "hit it," "catch it," "throw it," "get ready," "keep your head up," "maybe next time," "don't give up").

Negative—A statement that was unsupportive, discouraging, or dinigrating. Such statements included cursing, disputing an umpire's call, yelling instructions to the coaches, and giving disruptive instructions to competitors in order to hamper their play (e.g. "No!," "bad _____," "that's not what you're supposed to do," "Oh, no!," "drop it").

Additionally, notations were made of the person(s) to whom the verbalizations were directed. Target choices included players on the team supported by the observed spectator, players on the opposing team, coaches, umpires, and other spectators.

Along with notations of the "content" and "target" of the verbalizations, recordings, were made of whether the team the adult was supporting was ahead, behind, or tied at the time of the statement. The gender of each observed spectator was also noted.

DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

Prior to the World Series, two observers were trained in the use of the observational recording form. After three practice sessions at other youth baseball games, a minimum interobserver agreement of 80% was reached. Interobserver agreement was calculated by dividing the number of agreements by the number of agreements plus disagreements and multiplying by 100 (Hensen & Barlow, 1976). Only intervals where both observers recorded spectator behavior were scored.

At the beginning of each game, four adult subjects were identified through a standard method of random

selection. Shortly after the games, had begun, observers began coding verbal behaviors of Subject 1 for 10, 10-second intervals. Observers were cued for a 10-second observe/5-second record format by a prerecorded audio tape. After the 10 intervals were completed for Subject 1, observers then began observing Subject 2 for 10 intervals and this rotation continued through all four subjects for three complete cycles. When the game was interrupted by a time out, the tape recorder was stopped and recording ceased until play resumed.

A total of 11 games were observed during the 4-day tournament. Interobserver agreement data on the "content" and "target" categories were collected during 6 of the 11 games (54%). The mean agreement for both categories was 89.3%. During the remaining 5 games, the two observers separated and each observed four different spectators. Because the observations were limited to such a small number of games, this method was used to increase the number of subjects observed.

Results and Discussion

Although relatively few statements were made overall, results were analyzed as to statement content, statement direction, and statement content relative to game score. Additionally, content of statements made by male and female spectators was analyzed.

STATEMENT CONTENT

Of the 1,920 10-second intervals from which data were recorded, only 332 spectator statements were recorded for an average of 5.18 verbalizations per spectator. Therefore, approximately 83% of observed spectators' time was spent silently witnessing the games. During these periods, spectators spent most of the time watching, reading, talking with friends, or engaged in

other activities unrelated to the competition (see Table 1). Spectators spent the remaining 17% of the time period verbally responding to the activity with neutral, positive, or negative comments.

Table 1
Adult Spectator Statements
at the Mustang League World Series

Category	*n* = 64 Number	%
No Statement	1588	82.71
Positive	135	7.03
Neutral	175	9.11
Negative	22	1.15
	1920	

Regarding the content of statements occurring 17% of the time, 9.11% were judged to be neutral, 7.03% were considered to be positive, and 1.15% appeared to be negative. These results were similar to those found by Graham et al. (1982) and Randall and McKenzie (in review). Although, in this study, the level of competition was more intense, the frequency of comments increased only slightly. Although all the studies found neutral statements to be the most prevalent, this study reflected nearly equal numbers of positive and neutral statements. Perhaps the increased number of positive statements and the decreased number of neutral, coaching statements in this study may have been the result of the overall higher skill level of the children involved in such an elite competition.

STATEMENTS TARGETS

Statements were overwhelmingly (94.6%) targeted at the spectator's child or the child's teammates (see Table 2).

Table 2
Direction of Adult Spectators' Statements

	Category									
	Child's Team		Opposing Team		Coach		Umpire		Fan	
Statement	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%
Positive	133	40.1	0	0	0	0	2	.6	0	0
Neutral	173	52.1	0	0	0	0	1	.3	1	.3
Negative	8	2.4	9	2.7	0	0	5	1.5	0	0
		94.6		2.7		0		2.4		.3

Fifty-two percent of the statements targeted to the spectators' favored team were neutral. Positive statements were directed at the favored team 40.1% of the time, and only 2.4% of these comments were judged to be negative. No statements were directed at the coaches but 2.7% of the negative statements were directed at opposing teams. Of the very few statements directed toward umpires (2.4%), 1.5% were found to be negative. Graham et al. (1982) and Randall and McKenzie (in review) also found that most comments by adult spectators during youth sport activities are directed toward the fan's team. These researchers found that most comments in these settings are primarily instructional or neutral in nature. Therefore, the primary difference highlighted in this study was the increased number of positive statements directed toward spectators' favored players.

STATEMENT RELATIVE TO SCORE

Overall, the majority of verbal behaviors observed occurred when the spectator's favored team was behind (56.6%) (see Table 3). These statements were both neutral

(32.2%) and positive (19.6%) in tone. Statements were most often negative when the spectator's team was training — 4.8% of the verbalizations as compared to 1.8% when the team was ahead. No negative statements were observed when scores were tied. These results differ from the study conducted by Randall and McKenzie (in review) where spectators verbalized the least when their team was behind and the most when their team was winning.

Table 3
Statements of Adult Spectators
Relative to their Team's Score

	Category					
	Ahead		Behind		Tied	
Statement	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%
Positive	56	16.9	65	19.6	14	4.2
Neutral	62	18.7	107	32.2	6	1.8
Negative	6	1.8	16	4.8	0	0
		37.4		56.6		6.0

STATEMENT RELATIVE TO SEX OF SPECTATORS

A higher degree of females (F=35, M=29) were chosen in a random selection of subjects, suggesting that more female spectators were in attendance. Neutral statements were highest for both males and females. Although females made more negative statements than males, the total number is almost negligible. The female spectators in this study, as in the Randall and McKenzie (in review) study, were more verbal than the males. Females made an average of 6.6 verbalizations whereas males made an average of 3.5 comments. Graham et al. (1982) found male and female verbalization rates to be similar.

Table 4
Statements Made by Male and Female Adult Spectators

	Category			
	Male (n = 29)		Female (n= 35)	
Statement	no.	%	no.	%
Positive	42	41.18	93	40.43
Neutral	56	54.90	119	51.74
Negative	4	3.92	18	7.83
	102		230	

Conclusions and Implications

The results of this study support the growing contention among researchers in youth sports that adult (presumably parents) spectators spend most of their time in activities unrelated to the game. This contradicts the belief that, during youth sport events, parents are usually highly attentive and frequently engage in verbal abuse that discourages, denigrates, or overstresses their children. Though the level of skill and competition in the League studied was very high, parents continued to silently monitor the game most of the time.

Addtionally, this study, as compared to other studies of adult spectator verbal behaviors (Graham et al., 1982; Randall & McKenzie, in review), reflected an increase in the number of positive statements made to the participants by adult spectators. One explanation for this increase could be the high level of skills prevalent among children participating at this intense level of competition. Perhaps these children's performances more closely resemble those of adults. This could stimulate adult identification and positive response. Another possible explanation could be that children or teams who receive more frequent positive feedback respond by achieving higher skill levels.

Also, it would be interesting to know the children's interpretation of the overwhelming silence from the spectators. Do they internalize this silence as spectators' indifference, criticism, or attentive support? Further studies should attempt to interpret the effects of this spectator behavior on the perceptions, feelings, and skill levels of youth sport participants.

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