

BAD SPORTS

Celebrities show how not to be a good loser

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It's been a big month for sore losers, with a bevy of celebrities behaving badly.

Remember Faith Hill, who notoriously mouthed "What?" on screen when it was announced that someone else won a top honor at the Country Music Association Awards earlier this month? (She later claimed it was a joke.)

Or Kanye West, who less than a week earlier stormed the stage at the MTV Europe Music Awards? He actually interrupted the winner's speech to tell people that his video deserved the honor.

Even in sports, where you might expect more of this kind of thing, behavior has been particularly bad lately. Like when a defensive player for the Oakland Raiders kneed an opposing player in the groin during Monday Night Football.

Despite all of this, don't start writing an epitaph declaring the death of modern civility just yet. One pop culture observer believes something a little different is going on.

"It's not that we've become more accepting of bad sportsmanship ... as a culture, we frown upon it," said Robert Thompson, director of the Bleier Center for Television and Popular Culture at Syracuse University. "At the same time, we also value people who do outrageous things and amuse us in doing it."

And seeing celebrities break the rules of good behavior is amusing.

"On one level, I think we have a real appetite for seeing a celebrity throwing a hissy fit," Mr. Thompson said. "One of the reasons we like to see it is it's still considered bad or unseemly."

The important thing is to make sure that young people who see this behavior don't emulate it.

"Just because we see someone doing something bad doesn't mean we have to do it," said Dan Doyle, executive director of the Institute for International Sport at the University of Rhode Island.

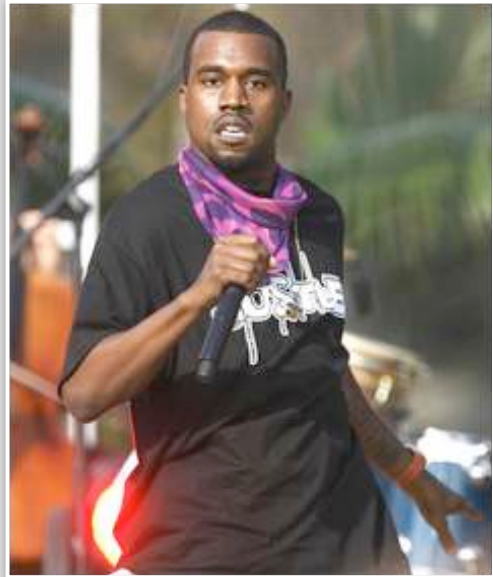
He has had more occasion than most to think about the state of sportsmanship today. His institute has run a program called National Sportsmanship Day for more than 16 years.

The first thing he said is to keep things in perspective.

"The bygone days were not necessarily that pristine," he said. "One of the marked differences, of course, is in those days very little was caught on tape."

There certainly are new and different challenges today, like the rise of trash talking and overly zealous parents who ratchet up the level of competition and sometimes take the fun out of things.

The good news, Mr. Doyle said, is that much more attention these days is paid to encouraging good sportsmanship and there's generally less fighting in amateur sports than in the past.



Kanye West stormed the stage at the MTV Europe Music Awards when his video didn't win. (NEW YORK TIMES)

When kids do act like sore losers, though, it requires action, he said.

“The thing you start with is you take the game away,” Mr. Doyle explained. “The one thing that works better than anything else is making a child be temporarily unhappy.”

As someone who coached youth sports for 17 years with the YMCA, Jim Marlow, of West Toledo, has tried to do his part to encourage good sportsmanship.

He said coaches take time out of practice to talk about values, such as caring and respect. Just as importantly, he consciously tried to set a good example.

“Research shows that the very best behavior builder and modifier is positive reinforcement,” said Mr. Marlow, a social worker. “So I always would role model that and would go out my way to positively reinforce and praise the behind-the-scenes stuff that a kid would do to contribute to good play.”

Tom Kowaleski, head boys basketball coach at St. Mary Central Catholic High School in Sandusky, said his league has rules against unsportsmanlike behavior such as stomping on an opposing team’s logo.

He also makes kids run suicide sprints if he hears them swear — one for each letter of the offending word.

“Usually, it’s about four,” he said.

His advice to the youths is elemental: “Act like you’ve been there before. ... Win graciously and lose graciously.”

There are some simple tips to keep in mind when striving to be a good loser, according to Cindy Post Senning, co-director of the Emily Post Institute and great granddaughter of the etiquette mavin that is the group’s namesake.

The first rule, she said, is to congratulate the winners and shake hands.

“Another thing really important in being a good loser is not to blame others,” she said. “You don’t blame the refs, you don’t blame bad calls, and you don’t blame others on your team.”

She added that this is sound advice off the playing field or basketball court, too — whether you’re a politician, a diva, or even a rapper.

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