City won’t riffle through people’s trash — for now

When coaching behavior crosses the line

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SPECIAL REPORT

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Drawing the line between ‘motivational’ and ‘abusive’ coaching in Palo Alto’s high schools

Frustrated with his team during a practice in fall 2008, Palo Alto High School girls’ water-polo coach Cory Olcott threw a ball hard into the water from the pool deck without warning.

Silvia Maraboli didn’t see the ball coming until the instant before it hit her face.

“It came at me so fast,” Maraboli, then a junior, recalled. “He has a strong arm. ... I had no chance to protect myself. It was a perfect shot.”

It left a bump on the side of her face that lasted several days. But she said what hurt more than the physical pain was Olcott’s immediate sarcastic response — “You wouldn’t make a very good goalie, would you?” — and his failure to apologize. Maraboli said she was in tears the rest of practice, which continued as if nothing had happened.

“I felt humiliated,” she said. “I remember thinking: ‘This is going too far. This represents the state of our team.’”

That night she decided to quit at the end of the season. “It was the final straw for me. I felt disrespected, uncared for — it was a horrible season. That night I cried like never before and realized how much water polo was spilling into the rest of my life, affecting my ability to focus on homework or anything else,” she said. “I thought, ‘I can’t go on like this.’”

Not everyone agrees with Maraboli’s recollection of the incident. Olcott’s defenders are vehement that the shot, even though it hit Maraboli, was not intended for her. Some think Maraboli overreacted to a hazard of the game.

“Cory didn’t apologize to that girl because he was yelling at the team,” said Tara Murao, the 2008 team co-captain and a Paly ’09 graduate. “You can’t apologize when you’re in the middle of disciplining people. She didn’t see the ball coming because she wasn’t listening to him, and she was all bent out of shape because it hurt her.”

Olcott remembers the Maraboli incident. He said the ball landed next to Maraboli in the pool and recalled that she was shocked by it. He said he felt surprised, tercible and contrite. He said he doesn’t remember what he said or did in response but of-
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The experience of the Paly girls’ water-polo team is only one of several visible coaching controversies at Paly and Gunn in the past two years. With each new eruption, a debate re-ignites within the school sports community over the questions: “When does coaching behavior violate school standards of conduct?” and “What are schools bound to do about it?”

To find answers, the Weekly interviewed more than 100 student athletes, sports parents, coaches, school officials, teachers and outsiders about coaches’ harsh or abusive communication styles and methods. There were no sexual-misconduct allegations.

Many players and parents who spoke at length with the Weekly requested anonymity due to concerns about ongoing team relationships, fear of retaliation, and wanting to avoid public exposure on a sensitive topic. Others were willing to be identified by name.

School officials declined to discuss specific cases, citing employee-personnel privacy. But, in response to a Public Records Act request by the Weekly, the district provided more than 600 pages of communications between parents (with names concealed) and school officials — revealing the substance of the concerns about coaches and the schools’ responses.

Almost half of the students at Paly and Gunn high schools are involved in 95 sports teams led by more than 150 coaches and assistants — providing many opportunities for coaches’ actions to be called into question.

Out of bounds (continued from previous page)

able, they need to be motivated, they need to be made to feel like they’re supported. ... My motivation has always been more that they should be having a good time, and it’s pretty rare that someone is having a good time if they’re receiving harsh treatment,” he said.

Olcott said he was pleased with the outcome of the school investigation: “I felt totally gratified that at the end of the process, at each step, the administration had come back and said: ‘We have looked at this. We’ve heard what the people are saying. We’ve investigated, and we feel like you’re doing a great job, and we want you to keep going.’”

Olcott’s description of his coaching philosophy and practices, and what the school did in response to complaints, stands in sharp contrast to the views of others who are still highly critical of both his past behavior and the school’s actions.

What the outcry is all about

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he experience of the Paly girls’ water-polo team is only one of several visible coaching controversies at Paly and Gunn in the past two years. With each new eruption, a debate re-ignites within the school sports community over the questions: “When does coaching behavior violate school standards of conduct?” and “What are schools bound to do about it?”

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WHAT MAKES A GOOD COACH?
Complex mix of factors results in outstanding coaching, player experience, experts say

by Terri Lobdell

What makes a good coach good? It’s all about teaching and motivating, which require clear and direct communication, empathy and responsiveness to player differences, according to experts with front-line experience.

How a coach says something can be just as important as what he or she says, as it creates an emotional overlay to the message, they agree.

“The job is in reality way more complex than what appears at first blush,” longtime Palo Alto High School volunteer assistant coach Dick Held said of his experience.

Paly Athletic Director Earl Hansen described a good coach as “someone who can relate and teach the sport at hand, understands and has a passion for the sport, has realistic expectations of his athletes and tries to communicate that clearly and effectively.”

What Hansen says about others could also be applied to his own 23-year career as Paly’s football coach, as numerous football parents and athletes told the Weekly. His dedication, commitment to the students and leadership skills were frequently cited.

Gunn Athletic Director Chris Horpel, another widely respected and experienced coach (of wrestling), said a coach’s temperament is key to a team’s dynamic.

“I look for that now, whether they’re a ‘yeller’ type,” Horpel said. “It doesn’t matter as much about the other qualifications or knowledge of the sport. If the temperament isn’t right he won’t be a good coach.”

The front-liners also agree that there are scores of examples of outstanding coaching, and coaches, at work daily in Palo Alto schools, even if those tend to get overshadowed by outbursts of criticism about individual coaches.

Horpel said great coaches help players do three things: learn something new, get in better shape and have fun.

“If you do this every day, the by-product is success,” Horpel said. He cites legendary basketball coach John Wooden’s philosophy: to make the most of the here and now.

“Don’t worry about the past mistakes or future goals. In fact, don’t worry at all. Just focus on doing your best now,” Horpel said. “This is the way to go.”

Superintendent Kevin Skelly believes that competition is a key piece. Coaches “can have lots of good characteristics but wanting to win is a pretty important one,” he said. Competition “drives folks to a shared goal,” which he said is a valuable lesson that carries through to the workplace.

A good coach can recognize some people are going to need a little push, so to speak, and some people are going to need a little pat on the back type of thing. Kids are all different. ... It’s just understanding the chemistry of the team and the chemistry of each individual kid and trying to make that team work as well as possible,” he said.

“A good coach can read each of their athletes,” Paly Assistant Principal Jerry Berksen said. “Different athletes are going to react differently. You can yell at me all day, but if you yell at this other person then you’re going to ruin them. A good coach is going to be able to figure that out.”

Dun Sneider, parent of two Paly baseball players, said a coach’s communication skills are key.

“Good coaches are the ones who teach well. Math teachers may be good at quadratic equations, but if they can’t communicate, you are a bad coach, especially if you don’t communicate effectively,” Sneider said. “The same is true for sports. If you don’t communicate effectively you are a bad coach, especially if you have to use other ways to compensate for your ineffective communication — like yelling, angry outbursts, swear words.”

“Then you are not only not communicating, you are becoming abusive on top of it. What good is that to the students?”

Held emphasized the need for coaches to appreciate the broader educational opportunities when it comes to sports.

“We need to help coaches see that their most important job is helping all kids be better kids, to believe in themselves even if they are not starters, even if they are not the star of the team,” he said.

Many involved in athletics are concerned that the coaching environment makes it hard to find good coaches — particularly the low pay, long hours and difficulty in dealing with increasingly competitive pressures and the parent community.

Horpel resists this gloomy outlook.

“I want to find great coaches who can direct the whole program in that sport. I want to get coaching philosophy on the same page and have a director of each sport. This creates consistency for the athletes,” Horpel said.

That goal is all the more reason to emphasize training, mentoring and enforcement of coach standards of conduct, starting at the top, most experts agree.

Positive Coaching Alliance’s literature stresses the importance of “message bombardment” in shaping a high school sports culture to achieve “total clarity of cultural norms.” Bombardment means messages need to be sent often, through multiple channels, throughout the years and cannot be overdone.

Communicating “the way WE do things HERE” is the primary leadership task, and the athletic director can’t do it alone, according to the Positive Coaching Alliance workshop materials for high school leaders.

Held agrees with the Positive Coaching Alliance’s emphasis on the need for clear messages.

“Coaches can be important contributors to the education and maturation of our children, but the community and school administration need to make crystal clear what our expectations are and understand what support they (coaches) need to meet these expectations.”

‘A coach is like a god to a teen.’
— Mary Perricone, Gunn parent

“Like our children, coaches are usually a work in progress, and we will have a future filled with even more frustration if we think that $2,500 and a steady diet of criticism in Palo Alto’s ‘very’ demanding work environment (from administrators, parents, student athletes, etc.) will attract a steady stream of candidates who bring with them the communication skills, life experience and game knowledge success will require,” he wrote in an e-mail to the Weekly.

“I have not met a coach who came for the money, especially knowing the time commitment required, but most left disappointed with the level of support and understanding they found. If we cannot hire the quali-
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**Good coach**

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fications we want, we must help the coaches develop the skills we, in fact, require them to have.” Held said simply getting rid of unsatisfactory coaches, when the broader system of support is not in place, can result in a revolving door of new problems with each turn-over.

“Sometimes it is easier to just get rid of the irritant than it is to deal with the larger issue,” he said.

Chris Redfield, Gunn’s former head and current assistant varsity boys’ basketball coach and a math teacher, emphasizes the importance of team play.

“If I try to make the experience of basketball about other things the players will carry with them for a long time. I want them to look back on the experience and feel strongly about the relationships they had with teammates. I want it to be something they look back proudly at.”

An “unselfish team” leads to success, he said.

Redfield said the toughest coaching challenge comes from playing-time issues.

“Every player has high hopes for what they can contribute. They have a goal to play. But there are always players who play less. Convincing them that they make a contribution — and they do — sometimes it’s hard for them to believe that,” he said.

The problem can be parents who view success in terms of playing time, he noted. Redfield sees having less playing time as a teaching opportunity for parents to talk with their children about the broader perspective: their worth as people and as teammates independent of their playing time.

“There are wonderful team members who have not played much. They are hard workers, help to push their teammates. When they make the effort, others are motivated. It brings up the level for the whole team.

“It’s wonderful to have a kid who is realistic about playing time but wants to try hard to do his best and have that work ethic. That adds to the culture of the team and tone of practice. The guys on the bench add a lot to support their teammates,” Redfield said.

During games, Redfield said, everyone should be positive, even if mistakes are made. The teaching comes later, after the game and during practices, and is done constructively, he said.

Gunn parent Mary Perricone recalls Redfield’s positive influence on her son, Kyle, who played four years on varsity and graduated in 2009.

“When someone makes a mistake, I try to talk to her as soon as possible to instruct her on how to correct what she was doing.” Palys varsity girls’ lacrosse coach Jen Gray wrote in an e-mail. “I start with what she did right in the situation and then try to be very tactical about explaining the ‘mistake.’ That way we separate the skill and the mistake from the player, make it less personal.”

Paly’s varsity volleyball coach Dave Winn thinks a lot about when and how to raise his voice.

“If you yell all the time no one listens,” he said. If girls are singled out, he tries to be careful to do it with respect and be clear and concise about what he’s trying to communicate. He believes in “feedback sandwiches” ideally with a 4-to-1 positive-to-negative ratio, and 2-to-1 the bare minimum.

Sarah Stapp, Gunn varsity girls’ basketball coach and physical-education teacher, said her favorite part of coaching is playing an important role in an athlete’s development on and off the court.

“I don’t do it for the money,” she said. “I feel a responsibility to give back, since I benefited myself from good coaches.”

Gunn water polo and swimming coach Mark Hernandez said he views the sports team as a second family for the players, something he considers rare beyond the high school years.

“It’s very special to be part of a committed group of friends. It’s a unique opportunity that won’t last or be repeated,” he said.
Some coaches generate explosions of parent and player complaints. Others inspire impassioned praise and loyalty. Sometimes it’s the same coach. The rest fall somewhere in between.

A changing youth-sports landscape, in which harsher “old school” win-at-all-costs methods are no longer in favor, has contributed to some of the confusion over what can be expected of coaches and what behavior is considered unacceptable.

Officially, today’s written coaching standards emphasize character education, “positive coaching” and “emotional safety,” according to school administrators and guidelines developed over the past 15 years.

Under these standards, winning is not the primary goal of school sports programs, nor is it the basis for evaluating coaches. Winning is a valuable motivator and desired byproduct of good coaching and hard work, but the greater rewards come from life lessons and strong team bonds, school officials say. Losing also can teach important lessons.

The Central Coast Section (CCS) of the California Interscholastic Federation, which governs high school interscholastic sports in the five counties from Daly City to King City, expects coaches to “ensure that pressure to win is not placed above education, character development, academic, social, emotional, physical and ethical well-being of the student-athlete.”

The national Positive Coaching Alliance, started within the Stanford Athletic Department in 1998 and now based in Mountain View, is both a catalyst and familiar symbol of this shift from scoreboard primacy toward positive-coaching methods and character education.

Yet official standards often “are not matched by reality,” longtime CCS Commissioner Nancy Lazeny Blaser acknowledged.

Coaches who were themselves trained by “old school” coaches often need mentoring and guidance. Lazeny Blaser asked rhetorically: “Who’s going to do that? There are no resources for that.”

Working long hours for low pay also leaves coaches with little time to adopt new skills, officials say. Despite these hurdles, most coaches at Paly and Gunn create positive environments of trust, respect, fun and challenge that embody the school’s educational mission, according to parents and school administrators. Many students view sports as a highlight and cherish the life lessons learned, as well as strong bonds forged through hard work and sacrifice.

“I will remember this forever. I feel so fortunate to have had the great experience we had and to have had a leadership role in it,” reminisced Paly ’09 graduate John Christopherson, co-captain of the varsity boys’ soccer team his senior year.

It is the sense of opportunities lost, as much as anything, that distresses many players and their parents when a sports experience goes sour. And it’s not only the visible controversies that create negative feelings. Parents say there are other cases in which discontented and discouraged players either quit mid-season or quietly decide to just do what is necessary to get through the season, confining their complaints to close friends and family members.

Paly girls’ water polo is one of several examples of controversial coaching that have occurred since fall 2008. Others include:

- Spring 2009, Gunn’s varsity baseball coach Brian Kelly was removed mid-season after he lost his temper with a player who objected to complaints brought by players and parents.

Complaints against Paly varsity girls’ basketball coach Scott Peters alleged swearing, yelling and making demeaning comments, but administrators said his behavior didn’t rise to the level of requiring “immediate administrative action.”

Paly Athletic Director Earl Hansen talks with a quarterback during a 2006 game. Part of Hansen’s job is evaluating his fellow coaches and responding to complaints brought by players and parents.

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A coach’s ability to manage anger and frustration is the key to avoiding abusive coaching, according to experts in the fast-changing coaching culture that concedes drill-sargent treatment of players, according to specialists in the field, locally and nationally.

There is increasing recognition nationally of the long-lasting damage such coaching behavior and language can cause to individuals who become targets.

Verbal abuse is the most common type, according to the Women’s Sports Foundation, founded in 1974 by Billie Jean King. Such emotional abuse includes name-calling, hurtful comments regarding performance, swearing at players and comments meant to demean a person’s integrity.

If “impasses the child’s concept of self,” according to the National Youth Sports Safety Foundation.

“Emotional abuse is, perhaps, the most difficult abuse to identify and the most common form of maltreatment in youth sports,” the foundation concludes. Its website lists examples as rejecting, ignoring, isolating, terrorizing, name-calling, making fun of someone, putting someone down, saying things that hurt feelings and yelling.

The coach’s ability to manage anger in the face of feeling frustrated and powerless is key to avoiding abusive situations, according to Michael Loughran, a Palo Alto adolescent psychoanalyst and Stanford University adjunct clinical professor.

“In the initial stages of being influenced by anxiety about performance, the heat of competition and all the pressure that brings,” Loughran said in an interview with the Weekly, “coaches need to learn to tolerate their own intense emotions under stress and pressure without offloading onto the kids their frustration and anger.

“Children who can’t do this make the kids the problem.”

Loughran said angry coaches without appropriate self-control seek out more emotionally sensitive people as targets. If the anger is ignored or deflected by an intended target, the coach will seek a more vulnerable mark — because the anger needs to be absorbed by another in order to be alleviated, Loughran said.

“Kids with tough exteriors, who can shake off a coach’s negative remarks, will be dominant in this culture,” Loughran said. This dynamic raises gender issues, as boys are more likely to be trained from an early age not to take attacks personally. Girls are more likely to absorb criticism or demeaning treatment.

Coaches may be caught in a vicious cycle, Loughran said.

“Coaches were often raised in the same system, which then gets perpetuated. They were brilliant in their sport, they make this their career, and then realize they can’t control the performance of these kids. That only serves to make them tougher, resorting to more yelling, more outbursts, more riding of the kids.”

Gunn High School’s Athletic Director Chris Horpel agrees that anger management is important.

“The basic problem is that if your personality is such that you get angry easily or were coached by an angry coach, and you haven’t learned another way, you’re going to have problems,” Horpel said.

At the end of a tough season, roiled in controversy, the Paly baseball team shows its disappointment after losing a Central Coast Section (CCS) playoff game.

Coaches need to learn to tolerate their own intense emotions under stress and pressure without offloading onto the kids their frustration and anger.

―Michael Loughran, Stanford University adjunct clinical professor.

He suggests framing the inquiry positively, considering small-group interviews to capture the complexity of what can happen and providing a good role model for constructive problem-solving in relationships. He suggests approaching kids with statements such as: “I’m collecting descriptions of interactions. Let’s not blame or judge anyone. Tell me what’s happening on the team. What are your observations when there is coach frustration? What interactions seem to cause problems? We’re trying to improve things. How could we improve?”

In cases where kids are targets of alleged abusive behavior, Miller believes it is “unrealistic, perhaps even destructive” to expect the student to approach the coach directly as a first step in resolving conflict. (Loughran agrees.)

“Because of the inherent power differential and the fact that the adolescent already feels unsupported and unfairly dealt with, this is a formula for further distress and demoralization,” Miller said. He suggests instead making a neutral ombudsman to help teens find safe support in working through issues. This creates an added boon of the teen seeing adults in a positive, realistic way of dealing with the kind of conflicts that come up in human relationships,” he said.

(Both Palo Alto and Gunn officials, however, said they expect athletes to approach their coaches first with their concerns.)

The Women’s Sports Foundation similarly recommends opportunities for neutral direction and assistance for athletes outside the athletic department. The foundation also proposes that coach-conduct guidelines be distributed to all involved in sports programs and include descriptions of potential violations and sanctions. It recommends educational and training sessions for all coaches about how power and dependence can influence relationships and result in abusive behavior. And it promotes the use of independent investigation guidelines to make sure officials follow proper procedures for fair investigation and effective resolution of problems.

These measures would counter two barriers to emotional-abuse prevention identified by the National Youth Sports Safety Foundation: that people may not be clear what behaviors constitute maltreatment or abuse; and that young athletes may not recognize what’s happening to them is abusive.

Out of bounds (continued from page 23)

To Kelly’s use of a sexual analogy and utterance of a callous remark (continued from page 23)

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rant immediate removal, though she found some of his language and comments “totally inappropriate and unacceptable.” At season’s end, Paly Athletic Director Hansen told Kadokawa he would not be returning in 2010. Kadokawa declined to comment about parental complaints against him when contacted by the Weekly.

The coach: ‘A dream come true, or a nightmare’

T he coach stands at the center of the school sports experience as a powerful figure with the potential to become either a trusted guide or the bane of a player’s existence. “A dream come true, or a nightmare,” one Gunn sports parent said.

This larger-than-life role flows from the strength of a coach’s personality and ability to teach and motivate, combined with the intensity of the sport and numerous hours the coach spends with the students. Paly girls’ lacrosse coach Jen Gray has had a loyal following. The “Viking Magazine,” the school’s sports magazine, named her 2009 coach of the year.

Gray believes students should enjoy athletics and naturally want to work hard to get better. She sees a vast opportunity to learn life lessons and build character — none of which she sees as easy. Her job is to “provide the tools needed to succeed.”

Paly ‘09 grad Helene Zahoudanis was an enthusiastic member of the lacrosse team.

“Lacrosse was great. Jen made every practice really fun, even conditioning. It was always positive. She never yelled at you. She never made an example of anyone. ... She really cared about all the girls.

“Her success was due to everyone’s participation and having a strong unit rather than a few star players. She believed we all contributed.”

Mark Hernandez, a Gunn teacher and coach of both boys and girls in water polo and swimming, is another well-respected coach. He emphasizes the need for supportive feedback, especially with girls.

“Boys think they can do what they can’t do, and girls don’t think they can do what they can,” he said, acknowledging the generalization. With girls, a coach needs to work harder on building confidence, he said.

“High school is a tough job. Young people need fans more than criticism. They get enough criticism in school and from friends. They come out for a sport to have fun. They all need to be reminded that they are good and competent. ... They respond much better when they’re not yelled at,” Hernandez said.

Because of coaches’ influence, their behavior often affects athletes significantly. Many players describe coach interactions as either helping them develop as young adults — learning a sense of commitment, work ethic and teamwork — or shedding their confidence and causing them to dread practices, lose focus on academics and even cry or feel like crying.

“Whenever I’ve had to talk to coaches, it made me feel stupid,” one Gunn senior said.

“Hey, sporty girls are at the mercy of coaches,” said another.

“Girls need to feel safe and loved in a team,” says Kirsten Atkinson, a Paly ‘09 grad and basketball player. “I dreaded going out to practice because it made me feel stupid.”

Coaches’ words and tone make a significant difference. “If you’re getting playing time, watch what you say and realize how vulnerable you are,” says Kirsten Atkinson, Paly ‘09 grad and basketball player. “I dreaded going out to practice because it made me feel stupid.”

Gunn Athletic Director Chris Horpel said the athletics youth amplifies the coach’s effect on them.

“Teens are in an impressionable, vulnerable state. ... You need to watch what you say and realize how important a coach’s words and tone are to that teen.”

Gunn Principal Noreen Likins agrees.

“When on the sports field, the student is getting yelled at or screamed at for doing something correctly or well, it really can do a great deal of damage to their self-esteem. I think it can be very destructive to the way in which they see themselves and their ability to participate,” Likins said.

Great coaches help players do three things: learn something new, get in better shape and have fun.

—Chris Horpel, Gunn athletic director

Paly senior Kailey Flather got her lowest grades in high school while a member of Olcott’s water-polo team.

“I had a hard time focusing on school work due to emotions and frustrations,” Flather recalled. After a full-blown panic attack in the pool during a game, she quit the team mid-season in 2008.

“Everything negative that Cory had ever said to me rushed into my head, and I was stunned,” she wrote in a letter to Hansen.

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Coaches’ influence is further magnified by the fact that they have nearly unfettered authority to dole out a most coveted prize in sports: playing time.

In a community where success is often measured by performance, a student athlete’s “success” is often defined by playing time. But because the amount of playing time is finite, the coach’s decision on who plays and who doesn’t can create tensions and disappointments.

Madison Hoffacker, a starter in water polo and basketball and Paly ‘09 graduate, said that playing time is so important that athletes are more willing to put up with questionable coaching conduct because of it.

“If you’re getting playing time, you will tolerate a lot more from a coach,” she said. Conversely, not getting playing time makes it “harder to tolerate bad treatment, and then you’re more of a target. The coach annoys you more, you don’t have a positive attitude and there’s a downward spiral, which is hard to break out of.”

Basketball player Atkinson said Peters told her there was nothing she could do to earn more time on the court — a blow to her motivation and self-esteem.

That comment disturbed Hoffacker.

“This is not something a coach should tell any player. It was utterly discouraging to Kirsten. The team became split in two over this; people took sides,” she said.

Codes of conduct

Both Gunn and Paly have developed athletic handbooks as guides for coaches, players and parents. Although different in particulars, they both emphasize basic core values. Gunn’s handbook speaks of the duty “to recognize that the purpose of athletics is to promote the physical, mental, moral, social, and emotional well-being of the individual players.”

The Paly handbook forbids profanity and explicitly states: “The same behavior expected of a teacher in the classroom is expected of all coaches during practices and games.”

In addition to the handbooks, school sport programs are guided by the CCS “Code of Conduct for Interscholastic Coaches.”

The code emphasizes the paramount goal of sports as educational. It includes 38 numbered provisions, with this lead-in: “I understand that in my position as coach, I must act in accord with the following code.”

Examples of code provisions are:

• Use positive coaching methods to make the experience enjoyable, increase self-esteem and foster a love and appreciation for the sport.

• Refrain from physical or psychological intimidation, verbal abuse and conduct that is demeaning to student-athletes or others.

• Put less emphasis on the final outcome of the contest than upon effort, improvement, teamwork and winning with character.

• Be a worthy role-model, always mindful of the high visibility and great influence you have as a teacher-coach.

• Refrain from profanity, disrespectful conduct.

• Control my ego and emotions; avoid displays of anger and frustration; don’t retaliate.

• Be open-minded and willing to listen and learn.

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Out of bounds (continued from previous page)

- Consistently demonstrate concern for student-athletes as individuals.

Richard Lapchick, a national sports expert affiliated with the Positive Coaching Alliance, said most high schools nationwide have adopted conduct codes as a result of norms that began changing in the 1980s.

“Shouting and screaming at young athletes began widely to be viewed as unacceptable,” Lapchick said in a Positive Coaching Alliance newsletter interview. “We have changed expectations of coaches at all levels. We now see them as responsible for kids’ development and well-being.” Melissa Baten-Caswell, a member of the Palo Alto Board of Education, said she believes one question needs to be the crux of any dialog about coaching conduct: Is the coach following the standards or not?

But while people may give lip service to that ideal, there is disagreement over how realistic it is. The sports environment is not the same as the classroom, and not all players, parents and even officials expect coaches to adhere to the same standards of behavior as teachers. Well-intentioned coaches deviate from standards when they believe their actions will be effective or due to frustrations in the heat of the game or at practices, according to athletes.

“Coaches need to use emotion, like the average classroom teacher,” one player said.

“Anger can scare people into doing better,” a former water-polo player asserted.

“Coaches yell and swear; that’s the way it is,” Murao, the water-polo co-captain, said.

About 80 percent of high school coaches use profanity to “get attention” and for “motivation,” according to former Gunn baseball coach Kelly. He admitted his own regular use of profanity at Gunn but said it was “not ever loud enough for anyone else to hear it, just the team.”

There are parents who don’t believe profanity is a significant problem, even though it breaks the rules.

“If (basketball coach Peters) used profanity, so be it. … (The) majority of all coaches curse. … We as parents need to learn how to let things go if it’s not causing serious harm to our children,” one parent wrote last year to Palo officials.

“Some believe harsh treatment helps athletes learn to ‘toughen up’ and ‘deal with difficult people.’

Former school board member Mandy Lowell disagrees.

“Instead of asking the kids to ‘toughen up,’ why don’t we say the coach should have to toughen up?” she said. “The person who is going to have to toughen up is the adult.”

Paly junior and basketball player Katerina Peterson defended her coach’s tendency to yell, however, saying Peters cares about the girls and is trying to improve their skills.

“It’s part of the intensity of the game. He’s frustrated when girls are not doing what he wants and blows up at them,” she said. If players don’t like it, they should leave, she added.

Barb Peters (no relation to Scott) said her daughter did just that several years ago.

“Scott’s attitude was win-at-all costs. He was too critical, negative and hard on the girls and used an inappropriate level of ‘old school’ methods,” she said. “Other players were not so affected by Scott’s treatment. Some have a combination of tough exterior and athletic talent that help insulate them from the effects of this kind of coaching.”

Dick Held — a retired FBI regional director, former Paly parent and assistant coach for girls’ basketball and baseball for the past decade — also parted ways with Peters after two seasons.

“Scott is … one with whom I had profound disagreements about how you dealt with young people. I think Scott’s conduct is wrong. I’m sure he didn’t appreciate the way I did things, as I didn’t appreciate the way he did things.

“And he was the coach, and there’s absolutely no doubt in my mind that he cares very much about kids and is a knowledgeable coach.”

“It was sad to see him go,” Hoffacker said of Held. “He was a help to our team and motivated our more emotional players.”

In addition to yelling, coaches have been known to throw and kick things in anger, including clipboards, hats, bats, balls or other items, according to many student athletes.

That’s where Gunn’s Likins draws the line.

“Throwing things, I think, is totally inappropriate. I can think of an instance where we have had that happen, and we had to say goodbye to that coach,” she said.

Whether or not a “violation” of the conduct code rises to a level that would require intervention, then, can be a matter of degree — or interpretation.

“It can be a fine line. What one person calls abusive another person says, ‘Oh, that coach is just motivating the kids,’” Gunn Assistant Principal Jerri Berkson, himself a longtime club baseball coach. “Certain students feel like when they’re told they did something wrong that they are being disrespected, so again the interpretation of the (respectful treatment) standard is pretty wide open.”

Gunn Athletic Director Horpel said he uses a simple rule of thumb for coach conduct, which he repeats every pre-season to his coaches.

“Imagine there’s a 5-year-old child sitting next to you as you coach or that your grandma is watching,” Horpel admonishes them. “Think about whatever you do as not being offensive or intimidating to that 5-year-old. This means you need to control your language, your emotions, how you deliver a message so that it would be acceptable in the presence of that 5-year-old.”

Paly Athletic Director Hansen said the point he drives home to his coaches is: “Never ever put a kid in a position he can’t get out of. If you listen to that, you can pretty much eliminate most of your problems.”

Bowers said coaches don’t need to breach or ignore conduct codes because they hold the ultimate leverage: playing time.

“I believe if you’ve got the right perspective, that winning is not everything, then you’re probably not going to lose your temper,” Bowers said. “You might be frustrated with the lack of thought or effort, but as coach you get to make the decision about who’s going to play and who isn’t. … The leverage is with playing time. Anger is not needed.”

The toughest coaching challenge comes from playing-time issues.

Chris Redfield, Gunn basketball coach and math teacher

Palo Alto Superintendent Kevin Skelly said he expects anyone observing a practice or game to find the coach’s behavior “exemplary.”

He said profanity, “being personal,” “beating up on kids” or yelling and screaming are “things we don’t want our coaches to do.”

Yet Skelly, who has himself coached youth teams, expects coaches to feel strong emotions as part of sports.

“Is the coach going to be invested and disappointed and at times frustrated with kids? Yeah, they are; they’re human beings. The challenge they have is to keep those things in check, and if they don’t keep those things in check, then they need to be spoken to,” he said.

“I think both schools have been very willing to pull the trigger on coaches they think are not appropriate. … (They) have a track record on doing that. Some people approve of the decisions that we’ve made to keep coaches and other people don’t, but … my sense is that even the coaches that people have concerns about are doing quality jobs now.”

Cover Story

Paly baseball coach Donny Kadokawa was asked not to return after a contentious 2009 season with complaints of yelling, profanity and a negative, angry style.

Terri Lobdell is a freelance writer and is married to Palo Alto Weekly Publisher Bill Johnson. She was a high school sports parent for eight years, with two children in varsity soccer at Paly, and was a soccer-club team manager. She never imagines herself referring any high school coach reaches. She can be e-mailed at tlobdell@paweekly.com. Jay Thorwaldson is the Weekly’s editor and can be e-mailed at jthorwaldson@paweekly.com. Jocelyn Dong is the Weekly’s managing editor and can be e-mailed at jdong@paweekly.com.
Palo Alto High baseball player Noah Sneider and his fellow senior teammates faced a problem in spring 2009: They were deeply troubled about the way their new coach, Donny Kadokawa, was managing the team.

While they respected the coach’s vast baseball knowledge, they felt he was riding the players too hard and to bad effect (the team’s record then was 0-9). They wanted to suggest more positive and less angry ways of communication.

Kadokawa initially refused to meet, shocking the seniors, Sneider recalled.

“As seniors, we felt a leadership responsibility to have a conversation with the coach about how to improve the team environment,” Sneider said. Many of the younger players did not agree with the seniors’ views.

Parent Joe Rizza said of the rebuff: “Donny was building a program for the future. ... His attention was on the younger guys. The seniors were just so much baggage.”

Assistant baseball coach Dick Held — a retired FBI regional director, former Paly parent and assistant coach for girls’ basketball — shuttled back and forth between players and Kadokawa to open up communication, Sneider said. Kadokawa ultimately called the whole team together.

“A fiery and uncomfortable discussion broke out” that upset the players, the “Viking Magazine,” a Paly student publication, reported.

“The gist of his message was: ‘Sack it up. Not everyone is going to be nice to you in life,’” Sneider said.

Kadokawa recalled the meeting in an interview with the Weekly: “The seniors felt it was their program. (that) they could do as they pleased.”

He told them, “You either buy into the system or not; you can leave if you don’t like it.”

A few weeks later Steven Burk, the senior starting pitcher, left. Sneider later followed.

By that time “I couldn’t even remember what I used to love about baseball,” Sneider said.

At the end of the 2009 season, Kadokawa was told by Paly Athletic Director Earl Hansen that he would not be returning to Paly.

As the Weekly’s months-long investigation of the athletic programs at Paly and Gunn High found, speaking up about a coach’s behavior can be fraught with complications. The very act of raising issues deeply affects people on all sides of the problem — players, coaches, teammates, parents and school administrators.

Emotions run the gamut. Players fear retaliation; coaches and their supporters grow defensive. Those involved in trying to address a complaint become frustrated with one another and make accusations about each others’ motives. Anger spills over when issues are not resolved.

The importance placed on high school sports and the deep bonds formed through hours of practice lead people to quickly take sides and hold fast to fixed viewpoints, which exacerbates problems rather than leading to understanding and better relationships between players and coaches.

The investigation found that students and parents who are unable to resolve problems directly with a coach face the prospect of approaching administrators in a system with no clear or consistent guidelines or procedures for how complaints should be made or investigated. In the past, that lack of transparency and unclear expectations added strain to an already stressful situation, parents have said.

For example, parents who thought they had initiated a complaint by meeting with Paly officials later learned that the school would not take action unless the complaint was made in writing.

In spite of district policies requiring (1) that any written complaint receive a response within 10 days and (2) that copies of complaints and the school’s response be provided to the coach in question, the Weekly found that Paly has repeatedly failed to do either.

The Weekly’s examination of more than 600 pages of documents provided by the school district — in response to a Public Records Act request for communications between parents and school officials about alleged angry outbursts, swearing and demeaning comments — revealed a qualitative difference in the written exchanges at the two high schools.

The documents, which covered the past two years, reveal that Gunn administrators generally responded more quickly and directly.

A greater volume of written complaints about coaching conduct were generated by Paly parents, as well as parent letters in support of coaches — revealing strong, sometimes personal divisions.

The documents also reveal the

In Part 1 of Out of Bounds, the Weekly last week described the publicly visible coaching controversies at Palo Alto and Gunn High Schools. The coaching behavior in dispute — including alleged angry outbursts, swearing and demeaning comments — was examined in light of current school standards of conduct that emphasize character education, positive coaching methods and emotional safety.

The Weekly’s cover package last week included additional articles.

“What makes a good coach good?” highlighted coaches at both Gunn and Paly who are known for their positive philosophies and practices — providing student athletes with educationally rich team experiences and memories to last a lifetime.

It is the sense of a priceless opportunity lost that most distresses many caught in a sports experience gone sour.

The vulnerability of teens and the power of a coach to influence those teens were also explored, along with the psychological dynamics that can lead well-intentioned coaches to treat athletes in angry or humiliating ways.

Part II also profiled the national, groundbreaking work of the Positive Coaching Alliance, founded at Stanford University and now based in Mountain View; the working conditions and pay for coaches; challenges posed by the growth in club sports and the impact on high school athletics and individual players; and the variety of sports offered, the numbers of students participating, and the different types of coaches employed at Paly and Gunn.

Part II examines the administrative challenges in overseeing numerous sports and coaches, existing practices in supervision of coaches, how complaints are made and investigated, and areas of responsibility identified as needing definition and improvement.

The role of parents is also covered in articles on Sports Boosters and Positive Coaching Alliance’s tips for the high school sports parent.
enormous range of sports issues raised in addition to coach conduct — including tryouts and cuts, length and frequency of practices, disputes involving referees, safety issues, whether fundraising events are compulsory, whether students must travel by team bus, tournament conflicts with holidays and Homecoming, fears of retaliation, problems in finding and retaining coaches, playing-time concerns, team management and communication issues.

They also show the diplomacy with which school officials have attempted to address specific concerns, especially in the controversial cases. Also, administrators walked a fine line, having to skirt personnel privacy issues while still addressing parental concerns, which required considerable communication skills.

Ultimately, the Weekly found that the schools’ investigations into questionable coaching (whether based on complaints raised by parents or players or on direct administrator observations) resulted in various forms of discipline. School officials created their approach “ranging from the athletic director talking about specific problems with the coach to termination of the coach’s employment.”

“We do that to maintain the level of severity,” Gunn Principal Noreen Likins said. If a coach is warned and the problem continues, “We would make it very clear that if he crosses the line there will be this consequence, and then we have to follow through with consequences.”

“Different athletes are going to react differently. You can yell at me all day, but if you yell at this other person then you’re going to ruin them. A good coach is going to be able to figure that out.”

Jerry Berkson, assistant principal, Palo Alto High School

Paly Assistant Principal Jerry Berkson said the time allowed for compliance depends on the situation.

Assistant Superintendent Scott Bowers emphasized the need for active progress: “The expectation would be that the athletic director and school administrators would actively move that coach toward the standards ... or else go back out and find a different coach.”

Both schools, on a regular basis, have done exactly that, according to school officials.

The schools “have been willing to pull the trigger on coaches they think are not appropriate. ... (They) have a track record on doing that,” Palo Alto Assistant Superintendent Kevin Skelly said.

“Manning up”

Unlike the Paly senior baseball players, not all high school athletes with concerns about coach treatment decide to speak up. They report worrying that raising issues about their coach will lead to retaliation — despite a state law that forbids it and official assurances that it does not happen. They fear their coach will give them less playing time, treat them poorly or provide unfavorable college recommendations. (Even those who have spoken up often felt these same fears but managed to overcome them, they said.)

Paly Athletic Director Hansen isn’t sympathetic to hesitating students.

“Get over it!” he said. “We do not hire coaches who are mean, unfor-giving people — and if they are they don’t last long.”

Gunn High School Athletic Director Chris Horpel also expects athletes to talk to their coaches. Kids need to “man up” and deal directly with any problem, he said.

Members of the Paly boys’ basketball team did just that when they decided to band together and speak up last December, after individual complaints about their coach the previous season had little effect.

“I had players come to me last season, last summer, during spring practice,” acknowledged Hansen, who said he retained basketball coach Andrew Slayton after addressing concerns with him and receiving his assurances.

“According to three of the players, however, problems continued, culminating in a highly disputed player ranking in December that placed the previous season’s starters near the bottom. Slayton declined to explain to the team his reasons. The players, who said he retained basketball starter, likewise benched and took the concerns to heart.”

“I finally gave up. It was useless,” one player said. “I will listen to kids before I listen to parents,” Hansen emphatically told the Weekly.

Palo Alto parents may have a reputation as quick to complain, but the Weekly found that many agonize over whether to voice their concerns about a coach and, if so, how to do it. Like their children, parents worry that raising issues will have negative consequences both immediately and in the long run for the athletes and their younger siblings, according to those interviewed. At Gunn, parents often wait until the end of the season before complaining, Principal Likins said.

“They are afraid of the repercussions or playing time being lost, so it’s tricky,” she said. “They also fear they’ll be branded as one of the outspoken parents who second-guess coaching strategies or complain vociferously about more playing time for their child, according to many parents. (See sidebar on tips for sports parents.)”

Cranky parents spoil it for the rest,” former Palo Alto school board member Mandy Lowell said. “They give parents a bad name.”

Overzealous parents aside, numerous parents say that school administrators can have deaf ears when it comes to even legitimate concerns — a fact that discourages communication. One Palo parent reported widespread frustration: “If you complain about anything, it’s automatically presumed that you’re griping about playing time — that is, unless your kid is playing all the time, in which case you probably don’t want to jeopardize that by complaining.”

Baseball parent Greg Atis said he called and e-mailed Hansen multiple times during spring 2009 and never got a response. “I finally gave up. It was useless,” he said.

Criticism about Hansen’s lack of responsiveness in his role as athletic director was echoed by many parents in Weekly interviews. Hansen declined to comment on the complaints.

Superintendent Skelly, however, said the district’s job is “to make sure the school has been responsive to a person’s issue and that they’ve talked to the appropriate parent to that, that they haven’t shielded it on, that they have taken it seriously, that they’ve been responsive to the issues there.”

There are times when parents have met with administrators and had success.

Taylor Lovely, a Paly ’09 grad and starter on the basketball team, said she and others on her team did not know how to go about approaching coach Scott Peters to discuss problems with “yelling, losing his temper, too much negativity.”

So a group of concerned parents decided to meet with McEvoy. Lovely said she was nervous about this because she liked Peters and didn’t want him to think she was going against him.

In the end, though, she said it was a “great relief” to have surfaced the concerns. Lovely felt Peters listened and took the concerns to heart.

“We saw improvements,” she said. “It started the positive trend of bringing with bringing about a healthier environment on the team.”

Olivia Garcia, also a Paly ’09 grad and basketball starter, likewise benefitted from parental involvement. She complained to her father about Peters’ yelling and swearing at her on the bench during a game (for showing “attitude,” she said).

“I felt disrespected,” she said. Her father arranged a meeting with himself, Olivia, Hansen and Peters, and they ironed it out, according to Olivia. After that, she said things were “better” with Peters. As the season continued, Garcia counted herself among Peters’ supporters.

“I also realized after talking with my brothers (one played baseball at Paly) that this was pretty standard coach behavior, and that I shouldn’t take it so personally,” she said.

Gunn parent Mary Perricone, the mother of four student athletes, also took direct action when her daughters’ coach’s conduct caused her serious concern five years ago. She complained first to the coach and then to Tom Jacobowski, then-athletic director (now assistant principal).

“She came to me and said, ‘My mom wants to talk to you. She’s heard some things.’”

“Many people are bullied into silence, but I believe in standing up to bullies. Regardless of any defenses

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Cover Story

D uring the course of reporting on high school coaching, the Weekly explored many facets of the athletic experience for local teens and obtained hundreds of pages from the Palo Alto Unified School District detailing its handling of complaints against coaches.

A sampling of these documents, along with additional articles on high school sports, are presented this week in print and online at Palo Alto Weekly, with the Weekly explored

READ MORE ONLINE

More articles and documents posted on Palo Alto Online

www.PaloAltoOnline.com. (Last week’s Part 1 of the series is available in its entirety online as well.) This week’s online package includes:

- Documents and complaints: Complaints submitted by parents, e-mail exchanges with officials and responses of administrators related to baseball controversies at Paly and Gunn, softball at Gunn and girls’ water polo and basketball at Paly.
- Sports Boosters: How Palo Alto parent groups fund major athletic projects and team expenses.

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Coach Scott Peters cheers on the Paly varsity basketball team.

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they might throw up at you — that you’re really concerned about playing time or whatever. The point is that their behavior is the issue and needs to be addressed,” she said.

Meanwhile, Perricone took matters into her own hands. During a game when it appeared to her that the coach was “berating” her daughter, using swear words, she protested the treatment, pulled her daughters from the game and took them home. Soon after her daughters quit the team — the only time her kids quit a team. The coach did not come back the next year, she said.

“The school responded well, although it took longer than it should have,” she said.

Investigating complaints

The Weekly’s investigation found that Gunn and Paly parents and athletes who decided to voice concerns were often unsure about what they could expect or whether administrators were following proper (or any) procedure. According to district policy, any complaint that is made in writing will receive a response. Usually, the author will be contacted and the school official will try to solve the problem. At Gunn, Likins said:

“Typically we respond and usually very quickly. We might in fact invite the parent to come in.”

Likins said such complaints should be shared with the coach.

Bowers agreed: “The expectation is that a written complaint will be shared with an employee and that any response to the complaint is also shared with the employee.”

That expectation is not always met, however.

In the case of Paly girls’ water-polo coach Cory Olcott, he said he was not shown any written complaints. Yet Paly received at least 22 letters from athletes and in some cases both parents (many anonymous) in fall 2008 containing strongly worded descriptions of Olcott’s alleged treatment of players.

Most came from families who had, this was not done, and became one impetus for parents appealing to higher-level school officials. Investigations into coaching conduct at Paly and Gunn have ranged from informal to formal. Administrators say they often start by observing games and practices or talking casually with a few players or assistant coaches about how things are going.

“These bottom line is that we should be responsive to people who have issues. It shouldn’t be: ‘Go fill out the form.’ It should be, ‘OK, what’s the issue? Let’s help you; let’s work together so your kid has a quality experience,’” Kevin Skelly, superintendent, Palo Alto Unified School District

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thletic directors at Palo Alto and Gunn high schools are in charge of coaches and running the athletic programs at their schools — and they have their hands full.

Hansen, Palo’s athletic director since 1993, manages 45 teams and approximately 72 coaches. Chris Horpel, in his third year as Gunn’s athletic director, supervises 50 teams and approximately 85 coaches.

Hansen and Horpel (both P.E. teachers) receive two additional prep periods per day and no additional pay as compensation for their athletic director duties. Hansen also coaches Paly football; Horpel heads up wrestling. They receive standard seasonal stipends for coaching their teams: Hansen $4,372; Horpel $4,607.

By contrast, most private high schools with comparable sports programs employ full-time athletic directors, often with assistants, according to Nancy Lazeny Blaser, Central Coast Section commissioner for the California Interscholastic Federation, the governing body for high-school sports in the state.

“Public-school athletic directors can’t possibly do all they’re required to do in the time they are given. ... I don’t know how they keep their heads above water,” she said.

According to Hansen, the athletic-director job is “more challenging every day” due to the increases in the number of sports teams and athletes, budget challenges, the numbers of coaches who don’t also teach at the school (known as “walk ons”) and parent complaints.

Paly and Gunn have taken different approaches to organizing and administering athletic activities. At Gunn, Horpel is a member of the Admin Team and meets weekly with the principal and assistant principals, including Tom Jacobowski, who is the district’s athletic coordinator.

Paly athletic director Earl Hansen, who has been with the school district for 12 years, said the committee has been meeting monthly since January and will continue meeting after horizon.

“This is definitely needed,” she said.

Skelly agrees. “It’s a forum for us to discuss issues and problems on the same page in terms of expectations.”

Common described the committee’s agenda as including review of all coach hiring and firing procedures, coach employment agreements, complaint and investigation procedures, coach training needs, and systems for coach evaluations.

Common said clarity and “transparency” in policies and procedures is very important, as well as good communication.

“If the rules are clear, the process is right and the resources made available,” the system should work well, she said.

Like many school officials, Common has a strong preference for hiring teacher-coaches whenever possible. They get the “big picture” of the school, she said. But she also believes the district needs to address the training of coaches, especially walk-ons. During her tenure as Woodside principal, all coaches were required to take Positive Coaching Alliance workshops, which she believes would be helpful in Palo Alto.

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to his office and fill out anonymous feedback forms while there. Horpel also sent e-mails to parents asking for feedback. After the evaluation was completed, head coach Matt McGinn resigned.

Horpel also relied on student-feedback forms, as well as a meeting with concerned parents, in deciding to replace Gunn’s varsity softball coach after the 2009 season, according to e-mails between Horpel and parents.

Whether formal or informal, investigations are only as valuable as they are objective. To that end, the school district assumes its administrators will be neutral, according to Bowers.

“The expectation is that any time you are doing an investigation you are doing it in a fair-handed and unbiased way possible,” Bowers said.

“The goal is to get at the specifics and the truth of it, not to determine what the outcome is,” she said.

Yet numerous Paly parents and players interviewed said they believe school neutrality is often missing when coach conduct is questioned.

“Earl is a staunch defender of his coaches,” one Paly sports parent said.

“It’s all about whether Earl likes the coach,” another parent said.

“The administration made clear who they were believing,” Fiser said, referring to the water-polo complaints.

Regarding Oclott, Hansen told the Weekly: “He’s the head of the English department at Woodside Priory. My next-door neighbor, the mother, works at Woodside Priory. (Her) two daughters had him in class and they loved him. We had the same from several of the other girls who were on the team who were definitely in this corner, and also I know the ones who had issues. So again, we have to go through with my experience, and understanding and knowing some of the kids.”

Hansen said some parents who complained about Oclott were engaged in a “witch hunt.”

Hansen also backs girls’ basketball coach Peters: “We have a young coach that cares deeply for his kids; there is no question in my mind. He did above-and-beyond then, as he is now. ... Sometimes a coach will be overzealous, but the genuine feelings that he has for his players comes out. ... I’m behind him 100 percent, because I know that’s a fact.”

“Hiring him was a piece of cake because I watched him for several years. He worked in our camps. I watched him dealing with kids of all ages, and they love him. He’s like the Pied Piper.”

Former Paly parent Renée Steiner agrees, based on her middle school daughter’s several years of experience with Peters on youth teams and camps. “Scott is a major inspiration,” she said. “He is so patient, (continued on next page)
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so delightful. It boggles my mind how people can have problems with him.

Hansen questioned the motives of parents complaining about Peters’ conduct in a February 2009 e-mail to Principal Jacqueline McEvoy: “This whole thing (new parent complaint about swearing) is about playing time and really nothing else. (The parent) now only wants to get his way. I think if Scott is that bad (the parent) should take his daughter off the team. ... It would be wrong to punish Scott for the few people that are very self-serving.

“Sports are a privilege and not a right. Maybe they need to understand this.”

In fact, Hansen believes most complaints have little or nothing to do with a coach’s behavior.

“As far as complaints in general from parents, I would say that 99 percent, if you cut away the fluff, are based on playing time,” Hansen told the Weekly.

“Fluff,” he said, “means ‘using every possible excuse to crucify a coach or discredit a coach — it’s all based on playing time.’

When Hansen investigated concerns about Olcott, he held meetings with the team captain, Tara Dernehl and Tara Murao, both Paly ’09 grads.

Dernehl said that she and Murao would help Hansen “in sorting fact from fiction, trying to make it so there was less drama and more water polo.”

She said Hansen would read parts of the various complaints and then ask them whether events happened as described.

She said Hansen once told them, “If this is true, then I need to do something about this, take this to the next level. But if it’s not, then I don’t want to do that, because it is not fair to Cory.” She said Hansen trusted them to be honest and unbiased.

“Mr. Hansen had a good sense of what was going on,” Dernehl told the Weekly. “He would say, ‘I don’t think this is true. Can you tell me if this is true?’ ... He would say, ‘This doesn’t sound like Cory,’ or ‘I doubt this happened, but I need to check it with you.’ What do you think?”

“I would say, ‘This isn’t really what Cory meant; he didn’t mean it that way,’” Dernehl said.

Murao said Hansen “seemed highly skeptical of the allegations. (Hansen declined to comment on the team captains’ descriptions of these meetings.)

Dernehl said those complaining Murao said. When the season ended, Olcott handed out his own feedback forms and asked the girls to fill them out while he stayed with them. Olcott told the Weekly these forms were “just for me” — he did not provide copies to the school until later asked during the investigation of complaints. He said the school has its own forms and that he expected administrators to do their own process.

“I think they want to do that independently so it can be as objective as they can make it,” he said.

Many girls said they were upset by Olcott’s involvement in the feedback process; they had expected an administrator would survey the team according to Hansen’s promises to parents. Some girls said it affected what they wrote.

Hansen told the Weekly he called a water-polo team meeting in his office to do feedback forms but no one did. (continued on next page)

Earl Hansen, athletic director, football coach
Palo Alto High School

Earl Hansen, athletic director, football coach
Palo Alto High School

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Cover Story

“Never ever put a kid in a position he can’t get out of. If you listen to that you can pretty much eliminate most of your problems.”

Earl Hansen, athletic director, football coach
Palo Alto High School

McEvoy, who expressed surprise when informed by the Weekly of Hansen’s comment, later clarified that what Hansen did was to have “informal conversations” with a majority of the girls on the team about

about that conversation but acknowledged that he did not have any “formal meetings” with players. “I didn’t sit down with them, he said, contrary to what McEvoy’s letter inferred.

McEvoy, who expressed surprise when informed by the Weekly of Hansen’s comment, later clarified that what Hansen did was to have “informal conversations” with a majority of the girls on the team about
Out of bounds (continued from previous page)

practices, the climate on the team and how things were going in general. He did not ask about coach conduct directly, she said. His questions went to the “mood of the team,” she said.

McEvoy said she was satisfied with the information Hansen gave her and that the findings ended up being supported by feedback forms administered by Hansen at the end of the season. She said the forms showed a majority of the team had a positive experience.

The Atkinsons, however, point to the school administration’s handling of their complaint as an example of a system that lacks neutrality, credibility and sufficient focus on the coach’s conduct.

In their final meeting, McEvoy asked the Atkinsons why their daughter did not join the team. “Why are you putting your daughter through this?” was her attitude,” Dave Atkinson said. “It’s McEvoy’s job to make sure this is an environment that is supportive of kids.”

Sending complaints back down the line for investigation can be problematic, according to Jeff Lamb, longtime Milpitas High School athletic director and past president of the California State Athletic Directors Association. If an investigation is called for at his school, the principal will usually bring kids in, he said.

Neutrality is important and the further removed the investigator the better, he said. While every school is different, he said, “In my experience, principals have been active in investigations.”

When asked about the investigation of the Atkinson complaint, several parents voiced support for Peters. One e-mailed school officials: “I have attended all of the games for this season (except for Los Gatos) and have never seen Scott be out of line with the girls. What I have witnessed is an inordinate amount of complaining by the players amongst each other, toward each other throughout about the coach, and a lack of respect by the players and parents towards the coach.”

Hansen said he has had no complaints about Peters’ conduct in the 2010 season.

Peters declined requests for an interview. In an e-mail, he wrote: “I take player and parent concerns seriously and have had an open-door policy to meet with any player or parent since I began coaching at Palo Alto High School.”

A complicated process

As with the controversy surrounding Peters, the investigation into O’Cott’s performance percolated up past Hansen to Palo Alto administrators and even to the district level.

In a February 2009 letter to Superintendent Skelly, parent Joan Fisher enclosed several other complaint letters, all anonymous but with the authors’ permission, she said.

Fisher said she received no response from Skelly, nor from anyone on his behalf. It turns out Bowers, who received the packet, had referred it back to Palo officials.

“It became evident that the school site had not adequately responded, so it was agreed that it were ‘ridiculous,’” said O’Cott.

Two other critical of O’Cott said Berkson told them in effect: “In your life you run into people that are difficult. You need to learn how to deal with it.” One of the players said Berkson also told her, “What Cory did was not a big deal. It’s standard practice for many coaches.”

“By no means did I try to shape anyone’s thinking,” Berkson wrote in an e-mail to the Weekly.

“I may have spoken to them in general terms that, in life, you are going to have to work with people that you don’t exactly like but still need to work with, whether it’s a coach or a boss,” he said.

Berkson met with O’Cott to discuss the issues raised. In a memo provided to the Weekly by the district, Berkson refers to “several incidents” in the feedback forms he had distributed (which he later provided to Berkson) that “were not unfair in their criticism.”

In the memo O’Cott takes responsibility for incidents contributing to the team’s problems.

But “the impetus came mostly from parents with unrealistic expectations about their daughters’ playing time,” he wrote. “To advance its own agenda, a small contingent (of parents) worked actively to under-
Out of bounds
(continued from page 21)

mine the work of players, coaches and other parents to build a cohesive group. Secret, exclusive meetings, derisive comments at games, and other divisive behavior placed the players in a difficult position and hampered the growth of the team.”

Several players and parents interviewed by the Weekly agreed with Olcott’s assessment that playing time contributed significantly to the complaints about his conduct; those critical of Olcott adamantly deny this was their motive.

Team divisions along playing-time lines are common when parents and students debate a coach’s methods, according to national sports expert Richard Lapchick, affiliated with Positive Coaching Alliance.

“This confuse the issues a bit. The suspicion is that the parents and athletes are bitter about playing time. This is a pattern seen over and over with problematic coaches,” Lapchick told the Weekly in an interview.

Berkson’s report to Fiser cited a “climate of viewponts” of overlook and correlation between lack of playing time and dissatisfaction with Olcott. The report also outlined Olcott’s tasks for improvement: Speak to the team as a whole about mistakes; and share concerns about a player eliminating sarcasm and profanity; the team as a whole about mistakes; or all three — parents and players on both teams.

Skelly commented: “The question is, ‘Did we make the right call there, should we have let this coach go or should we have kept him?’ The school made the decision to keep him. The kids (this year) had a quality experience.”

Signs of improvement

The most visible coaching-conduct controversies examined in this series do not exist in isolation. Numerous less-visible or less-controversial incidents occur and are either quietly resolved or are not pressed by parents or their kids. Some remain unresolved, and new complaints have been brought to the Weekly’s attention since Part 1 appeared last week.

By all accounts, however, the school year just ending has seen fewer serious problems than in the prior years, and the Paly girls’ water-polo and basketball teams finished their seasons without the intense controversy of previous years.

Whether the change this year is a result of increased monitoring and accountability, a change in team dynamics, or evolution of coaching styles and maturity — or all three — parents and players on both teams report noticeably improved behavior by their coaches.

Changes are also occurring at the district level.

In January 2010, the district revived its long-fallow Athletic Committee, consisting of top-level district personnel and the principals, assistant principals and athletic directors from both Paly and Gunn. Now led by Assistant Superintendent Linda Common, the group meets monthly to review athletic policies, address issues around athletics and make sure everyone’s on the same page in terms of expectations:

The restart of regular meetings after several years of dormancy coincided with the Weekly’s investigation into coaching behavior and supervision.

The committee’s work is timely. As shown in the experiences of a number of teams in recent years, school standards for coaching conduct — and what constitutes a violation of those standards — are not clearly communicated to sports participants in Palo Alto’s high schools.

Lacking clarity and reliable, comfortable channels of communication
and direct new policies to help solve the problems identified in this story, it is the two athletic directors who are on the front lines of the athletic program. (See sidebar on who is overseeing athletic programs.)

Their jobs — which include coaching their own teams (football for Paly’s Hansen and wrestling for Gunn’s Horpel) and teaching P.E. — are enormous and many say way beyond what is fair and reasonable given the high expectations of the community. In addition to running the day-to-day operations of their programs, they are expected to recruit, mentor and evaluate coaches for each of the 96 varsity and junior varsity teams in 17 sports; handle player and parent questions, concerns and complaints; and be an evangelist for a positive sports philosophy that not all parents endorse.

“The (athletic) director is a tough job, being in charge of supervising lots of coaches,” Principal McEvoy said. “You’re the one out there providing support to all the coaches. Private schools have full-time A.D.s.” Challenges aside, the vast majority of coaches in Palo Alto’s public high schools deserve recognition and gratitude for their contributions and dedication to youth development, parents, players and officials agree.

“You’d be hard-pressed to find a better top-to-bottom coaching staff in any school around,” Skelly said. Complaints “are the exceptions not the rule in terms of our coaches.”

Skelly believes that with current increased attention to athletic policies and practices, an educationally rich, positive sports experience for all Paly and Gunn students is more certain for the future.

“If you were to look at our coaches right now, I think (the ones with problems) are either not here or they’re doing a much better job — so I have confidence in our ability to get our arms around this issue and deal with it. I think we’re already doing it,” he told the Weekly. “I think we’re making very good progress.”

Cover Story

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Out of bounds (continued from previous page)

among athletes, parents and school administrators, coach-conduct problems often end up creating confusion, accountability issues, mistrust and divisiveness within and around a team.

Compounding those challenges is a lack of assumed goodwill among participants in many instances, especially at Paly. When disputes about coach conduct arise, unless the complaints are brought by the team’s starters, the focus is often diverted from the questioned conduct to accusations about parent and player motivations. Also, parents and players can at times be quick to demand a coach’s removal, pressing the coach and administrators into a defensive rather than problem-solving mode. In these cases, tensions are magnified, making effective solutions more difficult.

Although senior district and school administrators can adopt

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Terri Lobdell is a freelance writer and is married to Palo Alto Weekly Publisher Bill Johnson. She was a high school sports parent for eight years, with two chil- dren in varsity soccer at Paly, and was a soccer-club team manager. She never made a complaint regarding any high school coaches. She can be e-mailed at tlobdell@paweekly.com. Jay Thorwaldson is the Weekly’s editor and can be e-mailed at jthorwaldson@paweekly.com. Jocelyn Dong is the Weekly’s managing editor and can be e-mailed at jdong@paweekly.com.

What do you think of coaching at Palo Alto and Gunn high schools? Share your experiences and opinions on Town Square, the community discussion forum on Palo Alto Online.

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Editorial

Reforming Palo Alto’s high school sports

Lacking leadership and clear policies from the school district, Paly and Gunn have been left to deal with challenging coaching problems on their own.

With 1,600 high school students (44 percent) participating on 95 athletic teams in 17 sports, the sports programs at Gunn and Paly are huge and the expectations high. Both schools can rightly boast of great coaching and many hard-won championships.

But as our two-part “Out of Bounds?” series has explored, there are also many stories of coaching behavior that some characterize as very, very abusive by any normative standard. While parents may be of two minds about whether it is acceptable for coaches to express anger, swear, throw clipboards and go on emotional tirades with their players, official Central Coast Section (CCS) standards and virtually every sports psychology expert make clear that such behavior is not only detrimental to success on the field, court or in the pool but can inflict serious emotional harm on adolescents.

Unfortunately, while these modern standards are being widely adopted by policymakers, many popular and otherwise qualified coaches are either resisting or finding it hard to change their ways. And school administrators are struggling with how to hold them accountable, especially when teams are divided.

Paly’s high schools are not immune from this challenge.

Coaching controversies have torn apart teams and friendships — and driven some players from the sports they love. Instead of united action to improve the conduct of coaches and help them grow, this polarization has led some parents and players to turn against those who complain and to question their motives. The result is lose-lose, both on the scoreboard and in the happiness of players — and coaches.

It is encouraging that Palo Alto school officials, in response to the Weekly’s investigation, have initiated the first steps toward addressing these problems by reactivating a long-dormant district committee to review athletic policies, coach-evaluation practices and other key issues.

Without clearly written policies explaining to coaches, players and parents standards of acceptable conduct, consequences for violating those standards, procedures for complaining about violations and procedures for conducting neutral investigations, coaching controversies will continue unabated and occupy inordinate amounts of senior administrators time dealing with distraction players and parents.

Reforms we believe are essential include:

• A standardized district coaching agreement signed by each coach that pledges adherence to the CCS standards.

• A district-wide process for the neutral investigation of complaints, preferably by an assistant superintendent or outside contractor who functions as a neutral ombudsman for athletic issues.

• Standardized anonymous feedback forms and procedures for surveying all athletes and parents mid-way through the season and again at the end of the season, returned directly to administrators, not the coach.

• Participation by all teams in the Positive Coaching Alliance program and ongoing promotion of PCA values in all aspects of Paly and Gunn sports.

• Adoption of a mentoring program that actively supports first-year coaches and ensures they are meeting behavior and other standards.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the district should take immediate steps to redefine the role of high school athletic directors.

The current scope of responsibilities of the athletic directors is unreasonable and almost guarantees frustration, conflict and high turnover of coaches.

It is unfair and counter-productive for athletic directors to coach a team, teach P.E. classes and administer a large sports program. Their sole focus, as is the case in most private high schools with strong athletic programs, should be recruiting and mentoring new coaches, evaluating current coaches, mediating conflicts, resolving complaints and tending to the many logistical challenges of a sports program.

The additional expense will be more than offset by the time currently spent by the ADs and other administrators addressing coaching controversies and dealing with upset parents.

Just as it is in so many other ways, the Palo Alto Unified School District should aspire to be a national leader in the administration of its athletic program, demonstrating to other districts how adopting modern positive-coaching strategies can lead to a higher level of coaching, player and parent satisfaction, and a system that is fair and transparent in addressing problems.

Youth safety

Editor

I attended the city-wide budget meeting last Saturday morning at Lucie Stern. I appreciate the chance to participate in the process.

Youth well being is top of mind for many of us and it’s encouraging to see that it’s top of mind for the City Council. The CCS standards and procedures for surveying all athletes and parents mid-way through the season and again at the end of the season, return directly to administrators, not the coach.

That is, in my mind, undercuts our efforts to promote youth well being include anything that affects our kids’ ability to be independent, healthy, safe, eager to learn and well-nourished emotionally. I would be devastated to see cuts to our core safety policies, the traffic safety team or our libraries.

The crossing guards and traffic safety team work hand-in-glove to make it possible for our kids to get across town independently, parking cars off the roads and fueling their ability to be healthy and independent. My sons cross El Camino Real at Stanford daily to get to Escondido and before we had the guard cars would cut in front of us to turn left just as we were entering the intersection. It was nerve wracking and dangerous.

The guard makes it possible for the kids to get across without tears (from the bikers or the drivers). The traffic safety team makes it possible for the crossing guards to do their jobs.

I know the city faces difficult decisions. I urge the city to prioritize spending in line with our goals and especially the priorities as they relate to the health, safety and well being of our youth.

Terry Godfrey

Oxford Avenue

Palo Alto

Manhattanization?

Editor

It is unfortunate that Councilman Scharff and some of his colleagues are even considering the prospect of raising height limits for new buildings in Palo Alto, as well as elsewhere in our city.

If the current dilemma has taught us anything, excessively tall buildings in communities create a series of problems that cannot be undone. University Avenue in downtown Palo Alto has been transformed into a canyon that blocks out sunlight and scenery, creates significant traffic congestion, and engenders a grim and cold ambiance. A further “Manhattanization” of the city is unacceptable and must be rejected.

Matt Stewart

Alma Street

Palo Alto

Don’t change 2/3 rule

Editor

Even Rich Gordon, your choice for 21st District Assemblyman on the Democratic ticket, comes out in favor of revoking the requirement for a 2/3 majority to pass any tax or budget measure. Does he not realize that because any fool can craft a spending proposal which directly favors at least a third of the population — albeit a different third each time, that only 25.4 percent of the rest of us who will have to pay for his or her largesse need be convinced in one way or another for the measure to pass? So instead of enjoying what is effectively a 50-50 pass point we are to be faced with one which is effectively 25-75.

I don’t think that’s at all a fair or wise change to promote, especially in the spendthrift state that is California.

Michael Golden

Tasso Street

Palo Alto

Preserve safety funding

Editor

I understand that our city is facing a very difficult budget decisions, but I am writing to urge the city council to preserve funding for the Palo Alto Police Department Traffic Team and the Adult Crossing Guards. Together, these enforcement resources have been crucial to the safety of thousands of Palo Alto children, including my own.

I am a mom of two children, one with special needs, who will attend two different PAUSD schools in the fall. It is impossible for students to safely cross Arastradero to get to Terman without a guard. When we ride bikes or walk to Bronson in the mornings, it is drivers making illegal turns, park in front of fire hydrants, and drive through a do-not-enter sign the wrong way — it is a danger to my whole family — we cannot safely walk or bike to our neighborhood school without the traffic officers there to enforce the laws.

PAUSD’s 11,565 school children are walking/biking to school in record numbers. This is no time to reduce commute safety. As the city has developed housing, requiring us to expand our schools, it is increasingly important that we maintain safety for all residents, and especially our school children.

I strongly encourage you to prioritize public safety in your budget deliberations and support funding the adult crossing guards and PAPD Traffic Team.

Thank you.

Stacey Ashlund

Campana Drive

Palo Alto

YOUR TURN

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For more information contact Editor Jay Thorvoldson or Online Editor Tyler Hanley at editor@paweekly.com or 650-326-8210.

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MINNESOTA
Sports and coaches at Gunn and Palo Alto high schools

Sports offered at Paly and Gunn

Palo Alto and Gunn high schools offer a wide variety of sports*, run by various types of coaches.

Coaches who work as teachers at the school tend to be favored by school officials and policies. However, the demands of teaching make it challenging to recruit such coaches. So "off-campus" or "walk-on" coaches are hired to fill the positions. Some of them work at other schools as credentialed teachers; some have other jobs; and some operate private sports programs, including so-called "club" teams, as a primary source of income. The majority of off-campus coaches do not have teaching credentials.

Assistant coaches include volunteers from the ranks of current and former sports parents.

The California Interscholastic Federation, the governing body for high school sports in the state, surveys schools annually, and categorizes paid and unpaid coaches simply as "on-campus" or "off-campus" coaches.

Fall:
- football (boys only)
- volleyball (girls only)
- cross-country **
- water polo
- tennis (girls only)

Winter:
- wrestling (coed) **
- basketball
- soccer

Spring:
- baseball (boys only)
- softball (girls only)
- tennis (boys only)
- track & field **
- lacrosse
- swimming
- badminton (coed)
- golf (boys at Gunn; coed at Paly)
- gymnastics (girls, at Gunn)

* List includes separate teams for girls/boys, unless noted

** "No-cut" sports (means no tryouts, everyone can join). Note that at Gunn, football and swimming are no-cut sports.

Source: Paly and Gunn websites

By the numbers: Palo Alto's athletes and coaches (2008-09)

Gunn:
Total athletes: 832 (44%) out of 1,900 student body
Total female athletes: 375 (45% of athletes)
Total male athletes: 457 (55% of athletes)
Two-sport athletes: 191
Three-sport athletes: 11
Freshman athletes: 245
Sophomore athletes: 232
Junior athletes: 192
Senior athletes: 163

Paly:

Total athletes: 772 (44%) out of 1,755 total students
(gender/multi-sport/class breakdowns not available from Paly)

Gunn:

Teams: 50
Coaches: 85

Paly:

Teams: 45
Coaches: 72

Gunn:

On-campus paid coaches: 13 (8 male, 5 female)
Off-campus paid coaches: 48 (37 male, 11 female)
Off-campus unpaid coaches: 24 (23 male, 1 female)
Total male head coaches of female teams: 22
Total female head coaches of male teams: 1

Paly:

On-campus paid coaches: 13 (12 male, 1 female)
Off-campus paid coaches: 50 (39 male, 11 female)
Off-campus unpaid coaches: 9 (8 male, 1 female)
Total male head coaches of female teams: 8
Total female head coaches of male teams: 0

Sources: Gunn and Paly athletic departments; the Paly "Viking Magazine" student sports publication.
Club sports add challenges to school athletics
Upsurge of private clubs for specific sports creates both opportunities and questions for high school sports teams

by Terri Lobdell

The emergence of "club sports" in the past 20 years has created a pool of experienced coaches in high school athletics -- but it also has raised concerns about conflicts of interest and favoritism when a club coach has club players on a school team.

According to school officials and sports experts -- local and nationwide -- this growing influence of clubs impacts high school sports in several significant ways.

There are major differences between club sports and either recreational youth sports or high school sports, which often are less intense or have multiple goals. Club sports focus on winning and developing highly skilled athletes, according to school officials and experts. Clubs recruit players from wider geographical regions and from early grades, pay professional coaches hefty sums, and pride themselves on gaining entry to "showcase" tournaments and "premier" playing leagues, participants say.

"This is not the model for high school, where you play with your schoolmates and play for your school," said Commissioner Nancy Lazenby Blaser of the Central Coast Section (CCS) of the California Interscholastic Federation, which governs high school sports.

She said the primary mission underlying high school sports is educational. By contrast, for professionals running club sports it's about "promoting and making a livelihood from sports," she said.

Club programs cover a variety of sports, especially soccer, volleyball, basketball, water polo, tennis and baseball. They also offer camps and other training programs to develop skills, according to participants. Many club teams travel extensively to play other high-level teams in their leagues and at regional or national tournaments.

Young club athletes train more seriously from earlier ages to compete at higher levels, according to experts. Year-round programs are common and sports seasons have begun to disappear, as have multi-sport athletes.

Clubs become a way of life for many young athletes and their families. Parents are heavily involved due to the time, travel and financial commitment clubs usually require.

The single-sport specialization is a growing concern. The most frequently asked question at sports-parents workshops is how parents should deal with pressures on their children to specialize, according to a recent Positive Coaching Alliance newsletter. Potential costs of specialization include physical, psychological and emotional pitfalls, including burnout, overuse injuries and damage to parent-child relationships, the newsletter warns.

In addition, by the time students enter high school, if an athlete has not played club sports, his or her ability to compete on the high school team in many sports is significantly compromised, many sports participants say.

"High school sports don't matter the way they used to. Any sort of elite (play) is done at the club level," said Palo Alto Superintendent Kevin Skelly, noting two exceptions: football and track and field.

"It is what it is. I don't think you're going to change that," said Skelly, whose daughter, Gunn High senior Teresa Skelly, is heavily involved in the competitive volleyball world.
In fact, many club coaches and players view high school teams as a competitive "step down" and worry that high school play will slow a club athlete's progress. Many elite club players are discouraged or even forbidden by their club coaches from playing high school sports, school officials say.

Most club athletes, however, still enjoy playing for their school and do so eagerly. Some juggle continuing club practices (CCS forbids club contests if the athlete is competing in high school) while they also play on a high school team, several top athletes told the Weekly.

Club programs also hone in on preparing athletes for the next level of play -- in college -- complete with strategies for how best to attract college recruiters' attention and scholarships. This mentality can also pervade the high school teams and cause a ramp-up in competitive focus, at the expense of the educational mission of personal development for all players, many school officials fear.

As club sports have grown, high schools are pressured to be more like clubs, Lazenby Blaser said.

"Most successful (high school) athletic programs ... are deeply intertwined with club sports," Skelly said, defining "success" as measured by wins and losses.

As the number of teacher-coaches decline (see "The job of coaching" sidebar online), club coaches are filling the void.

"We want talented coaches and, let's face it, some of the most talented coaches are club coaches," Skelly said.

One concern expressed across the nation is when club coaches have players from their club team play for a high school team they coach, or who have players switch schools to play for the coach. The CCS recently passed a rule making the athletes who follow a coach to a different school immediately ineligible for play, Palo Alto High School Athletic Director Earl Hansen noted.

But there is no rule to cover a club coach landing at the same school his club athletes already attend. This overlap creates a real or perceived conflict of interest because the club coach may feel financial and political pressures to favor and play club players, according to numerous sports parents and school officials. The coach's primary income is from his club families; he wants those players to reflect well on his club; and there is a mutual comfort between coach and players.

Even if the coach doesn't play favorites it's "still a huge suspicion," Hansen said.

Students who play for rival clubs often decide, or feel pressure, to join the high school coach's club team and may that way gain advantage, or perceived advantage, on the high school team.

Coveted team-captainships (which carry status, leadership opportunities and college-application cachet) are often given to club players, fairly or not, according to many players and parents. Players who don't play for the coach's club can feel like outsiders and resent that, numerous players told the Weekly.

"These are all major issues that I did not have to deal with at the beginning," Hansen said of his 17 years as Paly's athletic director. To combat the club-conflict problem, Hansen requires all club coaches to provide him with their club rosters "so I can understand the moves that are being made, and that they're not influenced by money."

Skelly acknowledged concerns about potential conflicts of interest with club coaches. It's a dilemma, he said.

"I don't know how you stop that and still get quality coaches and still give kids a quality experience."
A confusing complaint process
Players, parents confront a confusing puzzle when they seek to make a complaint about a coach’s behavior

by Terri Lobdell

Palo Alto High parents Paul and Susan Burk decided to speak up after their son Steven quit the baseball team mid-season in spring 2009 due to difficulties with coach Donny Kadokawa. They thought the school might benefit from their feedback.

"Our biggest issue was the need for higher standards for coach behavior," Paul Burk said.

They met with Athletic Director Earl Hansen and Assistant Principal Jerry Berkson and suggested that Kadokawa should be disciplined for, in their view, violating school standards multiple times. Two days later, Susan Burk called Berkson to follow up. He told her then, for the first time, that if they wanted action, they needed to file a formal complaint. This requirement wasn't mentioned in Paly's athletic handbook or during the meeting, Susan Burk said.

"It was clearly a stall tactic," she said.

Welcome to the maze that greets parents trying to figure out how to make a complaint about a coach's conduct. At Paly, for example, parents see one version of complaint procedures in the athletic handbook, hear another version announced at the parents' pre-season sports meeting, and find another version in the school (not athletic) handbook.

The school handbook version states the district's Board Policy on parent complaints about employees generally, along with the staff-written "Administrative Procedure to the Board Policy." The Board Policy's language is difficult to understand and not entirely consistent with the terms of the administrative procedure. It is also not clear to the uninitiated whether it applies to coaches (it does, according to Assistant Superintendent Scott Bowers).

For parents trying to follow the correct procedure, it is often not evident whom they should see first (or next), how best to make the approach, whether a complaint should be in writing, whether their written complaint will be shown to a coach, whether and when to expect a written response, whether that written response will be shared with the coach, and what happens if they want, as some do, to remain anonymous.

Bowers explained in an e-mail to the Weekly that an official complaint must be addressed to the principal. Identified as Step 3 in the Administrative Procedure to the Board Policy, the letter "needs to reference the outcome of the informal level meetings (Step 1 is with the employee, and Step 2 is with the employee's supervisor).

"I would expect the principal or (assistant principal) to communicate with the parent on the process," Bowers wrote.

No reference is made in the Paly athletic handbook's outline of conflict resolution steps to written complaints, formal or informal [weblink]. Step 3 in the Paly athletic handbook, for example, is contacting the Athletic Director (Step 1 is the athlete contacting the coach, and Step 2 is the parent contacting the coach).

The lack of procedural clarity can compound frustrations already arising from the source of the complaint, as the Burks and others have attested. It can also lead to delays and missteps. What a parent thinks is a complaint may not be viewed as a complaint, or it may not be classified a "formal complaint," which may affect how administrators respond.
In some cases, school officials don't follow what appear to be required steps in the process, including timely written responses to written concerns or sharing written complaints and their responses with coaches.

The Burks took Berkson's suggestion and wrote a "formal" letter of complaint addressed to Principal Jacqueline McEvoy and Bowers. Their letter describes Kadokawa's coaching as including "sarcastic, demeaning, negative, disrespectful, insulting, unprofessional" behavior. The letter's specifics include a heated exchange between Steven and Kadokawa during a game with Menlo-Atherton, after which Kadokawa told Paul Burk, "If it wasn't for all the help you give our team I would smack you right now where you stand."

The Burks then met with McEvoy, who said the school would look into it and also send administrators to the games to monitor Kadokawa's behavior.

The Burks received a written response from McEvoy 10 days later. In her letter, she expressed particular concern about the M-A game incidents "because of their confrontational nature." She stated that Kadokawa denied making any threatening statements to Paul Burk but that he "did share with me that he expressed to you that he thought you were not hard enough on Steven and that if Steven were his son, he would physically discipline him." McEvoy characterized this as "totally inappropriate and unacceptable."

Paul Burk does not recall Kadokawa making statements about physical discipline of his son. "I would have remembered that," he said. Paul Burk confirmed to the Weekly, however, his clear recollection of Kadokawa's statement directed at him (Paul), as described in his complaint letter to McEvoy.

Kadokawa declined to comment on any of the allegations of the Burk complaint, the McEvoy response (which he said he had not received from the school but which the Weekly provided him), or the substance of other similar concerns about his conduct raised by several other parents and players during Weekly interviews.

Despite her concerns, McEvoy concluded that the coach's actions do not "warrant his removal at this time." She said "in dealing with these types of complaints, it can be somewhat problematic to separate out issues of personal coaching style vs. violations of our standards and policies. The level of evidence necessary to warrant disciplinary action against any employee is high."

The high level of evidence often cited as required for an at-will employee, along with the various hoops necessary to raise an issue and get a response, adds to parents’ confusion and frustration.

"This process is broken," one Paly girls’ basketball parent, who requested anonymity, said. "We want to bring up an issue and the first thing the principal says is that the employee has rights. What about our daughters' rights? Don't they have rights?"

In discussing coaching complaints, the Weekly found that Paly school officials refer to "due process rights," "conclusive evidence needed" and other legal-sounding phrases that are not defined or mentioned in the various written guidelines about complaint procedures. This raises questions about what level of evidence is necessary to warrant disciplinary action -- which could range from verbal reprimand to temporary suspension to outright removal.

By contrast, when athletes err, justice has been swift. Steven Burk used the f-word during the M-A game dispute over a pitching call ("are you f-ing kidding me?" Steven challenged his coach) and was immediately pulled from the game. He was to be suspended for two additional games. Steven took responsibility and apologized for his error; his parents agreed that he had made a mistake and did not dispute the consequences.

But the Burks felt Kadokawa also should be held accountable for what they described as more serious conduct breaches, including Kadokawa's own swearing (including the f-word) and angry outbursts, which they and other parents and players had witnessed. They felt a double standard
was being applied, to the athletes' disadvantage.

In her letter, McEvoy appeared to acknowledge that the adult needs to be held to a higher standard: "Although Steven has taken responsibility for his behavior, I believe that, as the adult in the situation the coach carries the heavier burden for defusing what became unnecessarily confrontational." She also outlined issues to be addressed with Kadokawa including profanity and derision; confrontational behavior; condoning or promoting corporal punishment; statements that could be interpreted as a threat to a student or parent; speaking negatively to others about the students; and the need for counseling with Hansen "to ensure he understands the line between creating a disciplined team through positive coaching, and disciplining the team negatively for their mistakes."

Yet, Kadokawa told the Weekly that none of these issues were discussed with him. He said no one discussed positive coaching with him, no one discussed the school's response to the Burk complaint with him, and no one provided him with a copy of it, despite numerous requests he said he made to Hansen and McEvoy for a copy.

Failure to provide Kadokawa with a copy is a violation of the Board Policy, which requires a written complaint be shared with the employee along with any response to that complaint, according to Bowers.

Paly girls' water-polo coach Cory Olcott similarly said the school did not show him any of the written complaints regarding his conduct, nor the school's written response to those complaints, although the subjects covered were discussed with him.

The complaint process left the Burks, like other parents trying to address coaching issues, feeling frustrated and dissatisfied. They had gone to a lot of trouble for a meager result that discounted their experiences and appeared to create unfair barriers to action, they said. In their view, a classroom teacher would go on leave immediately for the type of conduct they said they witnessed with Kadokawa.

The school instead waited until the end of the season and then told Kadokawa he would not be returning to Paly.

Meanwhile Kadokawa's many supporters rallied the administration in support of the coach. The district provided the Weekly with 10 letters (with names concealed) describing Kadokawa's strengths and potential to build a successful team at Paly. "An exceptional baseball coach," "the right man for the job" and "one of the finest baseball coaches in the area," were among the letters' accolades. Some letters acknowledged Kadokawa's shortcomings but argued that he "could build a program that would be the envy" of other high schools if given the chance.

One letter described attempts by athletes to meet with McEvoy and alleged that the administration made no reply to the athletes or the parents, which the Weekly heard independently from parents.

Some letters faulted the administration for failing to support and guide Kadokawa and other baseball coaches preceding him.

"Where is the demonstration that Mr. Hansen is invested in the success of Donny as head coach, or in a top-notch baseball program at Paly?" one letter writer asked.

Another letter writer claimed Hansen has "demonstrated zero investment in baseball" and said the result has been "a program that swirls with controversy, rumor and tumult."

Another area of confusion is the handling of anonymous written complaints, which are not addressed by any version of the complaint procedures. Yet they come up, as for example in the case of Paly girls' water polo, when a large number of letters were sent to Hansen, some of which continued up the chain to Superintendent Kevin Skelly.
Hansen said he does not give anonymous letters any credence. Gunn Assistant Principal and former Athletic Director Tom Jacoubowsky makes a different call: "I know a lot of (athletic directors) will never discuss with coaches an anonymous complaint. I would say a lot of times I have discussed it with a coach. ... I think it's important for coaches to understand what's out there and what the perception is. ... We prefer to get to things as quickly as possible here to avoid bigger issues down the line."

Skelly said the school district is looking at complaint procedures as part of its general policy review and that it is "pushing something forward" that will receive Bowers' attention this summer.

"The bottom line is that we should be responsive to people who have issues. It shouldn't be: 'Go fill out the form.' It should be, 'OK, what's the issue? Let's help you; let's work together so your kid has a quality experience.'"
Sports Boosters help fund athletics
Participation fees, fundraising efforts help pay for athletic teams, sports programs

by Terri Lobdell

Sharp budget cuts in the 1990s hit Palo Alto's high school sports programs hard and created new ways of funding sports -- including participation fees, a larger role for Sports Boosters organizations and energetic fundraising.

One change was the $150 per season fee levied on student-athletes. (Scholarships were also made available.)

In addition, each school's Sports Boosters nonprofit organization, run by parents and school officials, increased fundraising efforts to support sports expenses not covered by the fees.

The fees and fundraising now cover nearly all non-coaching costs of local public high school athletics -- including equipment, officials, uniforms, transportation, tournament fees, medical supplies, janitors, ticket-takers, portable toilets, police, parking attendants, league fees, awards trophies and plaques, according to Sports Boosters officials at both Gunn and Paly.

Sports Boosters is prohibited from paying coaches. Coach compensation remains in the school district budget, and coaches continue as district employees, both school and Sports Boosters officials say.

Low coach pay remains a concern, however, and some parents chafe at restrictions. One Gunn High School softball parent asked Athletic Director Chris Horpel about how to supplement coach compensation in an effort to stabilize the program after a history of turnovers.

"Frankly I'd rather put my money and energy into helping the school than some hyper-competitive club team," the parent wrote in a September 2009 e-mail.

Horpel responded: "Parents can ... give 'presents' to their coaches, which can be anything from a gift certificate to Starbucks to a check for $5,000. These gifts cannot be given up front, as this is against (Palo Alto Unified School District) policies."

When contacted by the Weekly about the e-mail, Horpel said he does not know of any large gifts of the type his e-mail suggested. The usual coach gift at the end of a season is around $100-$200, he said. However, he noted, there is no way of knowing, as there is no documentation of gift amounts.

"Since the district does not allow any additional funds to be given as a stipend, a gift is the only way around it, if you want to look at it that way," he said.

Assistant Superintendent Scott Bowers confirmed that the district does not have a specific policy on employee gifts, although he pointed to Board Policy E 4119.21, which prohibits credentialed teachers from accepting gifts that might impair professional decisions. This leaves a large gray area.

Sports Boosters is permitted, however, to pay for coach-training classes at both Palo Alto public high schools, including the required "Fundamentals of Coaching" course (administered by national organizations, including an online version) for all coaches, paid and unpaid.

An additional source of funds for this course comes from the "Stellar Coaches Fund," established by a Palo Alto family and available to both schools for certain designated sports expenses. Between the Stellar fund and the Boosters, the required training courses are covered at both schools, according to Gunn and Paly Boosters.
Sports Boosters' fundraising is accomplished through the sale of Sports Booster Passes, school gear and fundraising events. At Gunn, there is an annual winter fundraising dinner at Trader Vic's. Paly Sports Boosters sponsored a Christmas tree lot this past year and also hosts a spring golf tournament. This year both Paly and Gunn benefited from a Palo Alto Firefighters cook-off to support local high school sports programs.

Last year, Paly Sports Boosters Treasurer Karan Barich reported that $175,000 from the Sports Boosters general fund (which includes participation fees along with fundraising dollars) was deposited into the Paly athletic account to reimburse program expenditures. Team "extras" such as team parties, special gear and other amenities are paid for through team-specific fundraising activities at both schools, including concession stands. These funds are deposited into separate "team accounts" also administered by Sports Boosters. Larger facilities projects at both schools are also funded by Sports Boosters, along with other private organizations and donors, according to the Boosters.

A second and separate nonprofit organization is also affiliated with Paly sports, called the ACCEL ("Athletic Communities Create Exceptional Leaders") Foundation. Founded by Paly parents, it raises funds for larger facilities projects at Paly, according to Dave Atkinson, one of its founders.

ACCEL has paid for Paly's new pool, the baseball infield and the new track at Paly, in addition to contributing to the costs of the stadium lights. In addition, the Paly Sports Boosters has paid for recent renovation of the gym entrance, renovation of the trophy cases and new Viking logos for the gym floor, according to Barich. Two years ago, Barich said that Paly Sports Boosters provided the almost $40,000 needed to finish and equip Paly's new pool.

Gunn Sports Boosters Treasurer Nancy Hughes said Gunn Sports Boosters has raised about $170,000 for a new track, about $350,000 for stadium lights, about $250,000 for architectural plans for the new pool, and about $125,000 for turf infield for baseball, dugouts and scoreboards. Hughes said the passage of Measure A in 2005 "provided a welcome and significant balance in our needs for major project fundraising."

The athletic directors at each school are closely involved in setting funding priorities for all Sports Boosters expenditures. Barich said Paly Athletic Director Earl Hansen "works with each sport's head coach to determine what each team needs in a given year. He budgets the athletic program expenditures in the same manner and with the same authority as he did when (Palo Alto Unified School District) was paying the bills."

At Gunn, Hughes said, the $150 participation fees are deposited directly into Gunn accounts and are part of the school budget administered directly by Horpel as athletic director.
The job of coaching
For many, the work means long hours, low pay, high expectations, shifting personnel

by Terri Lobdell

Until the '90s, the vast majority of head coaches at Gunn and Palo Alto high schools were teachers connected to the school.

If a teacher coached two sports, he or she was granted an extra prep period in addition to a standard modest stipend. But with budget cuts, the prep period disappeared, making it harder for teachers to coach.

Several factors combined to force high schools to find coaches from outside the schools: More sports and teams were offered to students, increasing participation; an older teacher population resulted in fewer teacher-coaches; and increasing classroom demands left teachers with less time and energy for coaching.

Schools turned to outside coaches, called "walk-ons," who either have non-sports "day jobs" flexible enough to allow a part-time, seasonal coaching position or ongoing professional careers in the youth sports world (such as operating club teams, camps and other private youth sports programs).

Schools still prefer the teacher-coach, if available.

"They're a big plus," Paly Athletic Director Earl Hansen said.

Walk-on coaches generally focus more on winning and less on the larger educational and developmental coaching tasks than teacher-coaches, school officials say. Walk-on coaches are also less oriented to the school culture and other pressures in a student's life, and they have fewer opportunities to communicate with the school community, including to teachers, administrators and parents. They are only on campus for a short season each year.

For walk-on coaches who run private club teams, coaching a high school team can bring conflicts of interest when some of their club players are also on their high school teams. Suspicions of favoritism toward club players, either real or perceived, can cause team tensions. (See the sidebar, "Club sports."

Despite reservations about walk-on coaches, most school officials accept them as both necessary and often the most knowledgeable about the sport involved.

Coaches, whether teacher or "walk on," don't do it for the money. Stipends paid to coaches vary - depending on the sport, the number of years coaching and whether the coach is a credentialed teacher -- but they are modest compared to the hours worked and demands made. View the coaches' compensation schedule.

A credentialed longtime varsity football coach such as Hansen is at the top of the pay-scale with a stipend of $4,372 in 2009. A starting varsity golf or diving "walk-on" coach with no teaching credential is paid at the low end: $1,367.

The highest-paid "A" category varsity sports are football, basketball, track and swimming (the latter two because of the high number of participants).

The "A" coach pay ranges from $2,733 to $4,372. In the "B" category, which includes the rest of the varsity sports (except golf and diving) and frosh/soph football, the range is $2,277 to $3,718.
Junior varsity coaches (except frosh/soph football) and some assistant coaches are paid between $1,367 and $3,066, with a ceiling of $2,186 if the coach is non-credentialed. In addition, many assistant coaches are volunteers.

Paly volleyball coach Dave Winn earned $2,505 as a non-credentialed "walk on" in his third season this year. As to time spent, Winn estimated the following: During a 12-week season, he spends at least 17 hours a week on practices, matches, planning and communicating with administrators, players, parents and press. In addition, there are three or four Saturday tournaments and letters of recommendation to write for players' college applications.

During "pre-season" in the summer, Winn spends more than 50 hours in open gyms and managing team tryouts.

It adds up to a conservative estimate of 300 total hours spent or about $8 per hour for Winn.

According to Scott Bowers, Palo Alto assistant superintendent for human resources, coaches have traditionally been low-paid.

"You have to love what you're doing, enjoy spending time with it," Bowers said.

He said there is no requirement for hours coaches put in. They are contracted to do a particular job "and if they can do it in 10 hours or 100 hours they get the same amount."

Yet just attending all games and practices adds up.

"That's why sometimes it's hard to get coaches," Bowers said.

Coaches have no job security either. Unlike teachers, there is no union to represent the coaches (even those credentialed at the school). All coaches are "at will" employees in their coaching roles, hired on a season-to-season basis. They may be terminated at any time, including mid-season, for failure to comply with school or Central Coast Section (CCS) standards.

The district currently doesn't ask coaches for written agreements beyond payroll forms.

Coaches are provided the school handbooks and the CCS Code of Conduct and told to abide by them. They are instructed in pre-season meetings about their myriad duties, including paperwork, coaching courses, scheduling, facility use, transportation, player eligibility, training certifications, finances and fundraising, uniforms and equipment, league meetings, publicity, communicating with parents, hazing, tryouts, safety and sportsmanship issues.

Most school officials interviewed by the Weekly think that it would be a good idea to have coaches sign an agreement formalizing their commitment to abide by the school's standards of conduct.

"I was surprised when I came to this district that coaches don't have written agreements," Paly Principal Jacquie McEvoy said. "When you formalize a contract, it raises commitment to a different level."

This is something the district is now exploring.
Positive Coaching Alliance seeks to eliminate 'poisonous negativity' in youth sports
National program, based in Mountain View, seeks to transform the culture of youth sports

by Terri Lobdell

Jim Thompson has taken on one of the great sports challenges of our time: changing the way some youth coaches treat their teams and players.

"I thought about how poisonous negativity can be to a team or organization, yet how prevalent it is in our world of sports," he wrote in a recent newsletter of the nonprofit organization he formed in 1998, Positive Coaching Alliance. He presently is the group's executive director.

Thompson's focus on youth sports dates from the mid-1980s, when he became interested in a state program on promoting self-esteem in young persons.


Positive Coaching Alliance was first headquartered at the Stanford Athletic Department but later moved to Mountain View as it expanded nationwide.

"The very name of our organization ... came from my observing the harmful effects of unrestrained negativity by coaches and parents on youth athletes," Thompson wrote of Positive Coaching Alliance's origins. It now has partnered with more than 1,100 youth sports organizations, leagues, schools and cities and has conducted more than 6,000 workshops for youth-sports coaches, parents, organizational leaders and athletes.

The program essentially coaches coaches.

It emphasizes the personal discipline it takes "to stay positive in the face of adversity, even boneheaded mistakes by members of one's team. ... It takes discipline to remain positive no matter what happens," he wrote.

"It's not easy, but it leads to a legacy I think every coach wants to create -- to be remembered as someone who made players better.

"And it begins with a commitment to being positive."

Thompson cites extensive academic research to support a "Positive Coach Mental Model." The research examines effects of emotions on the brain's ability to focus and learn.

Negative emotions (such as fear and anxiety) narrow the focus while positive emotions expand it. The conclusions are that athletes in a positive emotional state can take in more information and have more energy to apply it creatively. They are able to build physical, intellectual and social resources more effectively, Thompson said. The result is a happier, healthier athlete and team.

Positive Coaching Alliance promotes a new definition of what it means to be a "winner" in sports, along with strategies for accomplishing this through positive coaching methods developed by Thompson and taught in workshops.
Both Paly and Gunn have offered Positive Coaching Alliance workshops to coaches in past years, although lack of funding prohibits that from happening regularly.

According to Positive Coaching Alliance, a positive coach:

* Focuses on effort rather than outcome.

* Helps athletes see mistakes as a vital part of learning anything complicated. Fear of making a mistake is a paralyzing force that robs athletes of spontaneity, love of the game and a willingness to try new things.

* Fills the athlete’s "emotional tank" with compliments, praise and positive recognition and refuses to motivate through fear, intimidation or shame.

* Makes corrections "sandwiched" with praise. Positive Coaching Alliance recommends a 5-to-1 ratio of praise to criticism, based on research studies. Players can rarely absorb criticism during the heat of a game or when a coach is angry.

* Communicates in unmistakable ways that each athlete is accepted and valued. For a young athlete, the coach is one of the most important individuals in his or her life, and the perception of how the coach regards the athlete impacts the athlete’s developing identity and self-esteem.

* Apologizes to kids for mistakes made. A coach who apologizes to a player is communicating that he or she values the player.

* Engages athletes in the learning process by giving them opportunities to participate in decision-making and goal-setting.

* Remains positive with players, rain or shine. This takes discipline. There is nothing tough about getting negative when things don’t go your way. A coach who can have hard conversations with kids while remaining positive is more likely to change behavior. A coach who establishes a positive team culture will be remembered by players long after they have moved on.

* Honors the game by modeling respect for all participants, including officials and opponents.

For school administrators, Positive Coaching Alliance emphasizes the importance of creating a sports culture with clear standards, so everyone knows what is expected. Positive Coaching Alliance advises taking action ("fixing broken windows") when standards are violated. Otherwise, the sports culture begins to degrade, the Alliance warns.

To assist school leaders, Positive Coaching Alliance training materials include job descriptions for coaches and coach evaluation forms for players and parents to fill out mid-season and at season’s end.

"The athletic director can't do it alone," Positive Coaching Alliance states.

Five years ago, the organization began a partnership with San Jose's Oak Grove High School, under the leadership of Athletic Director (and football coach) Ed Buller. The partnership (funded by private donations to Positive Coaching Alliance) was launched with workshops for all administrators and coaches. Then both the football and basketball teams were targeted with an annual Positive Coaching Alliance workshop for players and coaches combined.

"Repetition is important. They hear the same messages year after year," Buller told the Weekly.

Last year the Positive Coaching Alliance program was expanded to include weekly "talking points" (e-mailed by Thompson each Sunday night) used in half-hour discussion sessions before practice once a week.
Buller is enthusiastic.

"This is good for kids," he said. "As coaches, we have a wonderful platform to teach our kids life skills. (Positive Coaching Alliance) helps us do that."

He said the teams have thrived by learning how to deal with mistakes and support each other.

Since many of Oak Grove's athletes play multiple sports, Buller has noticed that the Positive Coaching Alliance teachings are spreading into other sports through the athletes and stimulating other athletes and coaches to want to be involved, too.

"Once a coach goes through the workshop, he sees it's helpful and positive. Coaches come out as believers," Buller said.

The players become partners in the process. If coaches forget, the kids remind them about remaining positive.

"The kids turn into mentors," Buller said. "They use and can recite the (Positive Coaching Alliance) principles. It's exciting."