

Character Athletes Award “Sportsperson of the Game” to Opposing Players Perryville Middle School & Perry County High School

Below is the complete application and rationale for a 2007 Promising Practice that continues to inspire teams in our region.

1) What is the practice and how have you implemented it in your school or district?

We were looking for a means to further expand and enhance our character education process within our high school. Since sportsmanship is an ongoing component of the sporting activities for a high school, we decided to use that avenue as a link for this expansion. The goal was to further involve students in the promotion of practicing good character. Our primary objective was to make our own students more aware of the actions of good character as displayed in real life situations. In this case, it would be in the actual sports game. The rationale was that if our students were required to look for good character in others, they would be more apt to be aware of and practice it within themselves. Thus, we implemented our **Character Athlete** process. We clearly wanted the philosophy of this Character Education component to be delivered as an intentional and proactive measure. It was to be the teams’ foundation for participating in sporting events. We expected the coaches to fully integrate the idea that good character must carry over from the school day and classroom onto the sporting fields and courts of our students. We felt our students understood the emphasis and importance that our district was placing on positive living in all avenues of their lives. They knew what good character meant, was, and looked like. We had exposed them to the “head” and “heart” pieces. Now, we wanted them to look for it in action—the “hands” piece. The sporting fields and courts would be a place we could expose them to being aware of it in others and themselves and how it looked in real-life activity. This new component would begin as each team participated in a home sporting contest. Our team members would have ownership as they would choose an athlete from their opposition that had demonstrated good character during the game. That student would then receive recognition in the form of a letter from our district Character Education coordinator and our Athletic Director sent to the superintendent of the visiting school. Along with this letter, a personal letter and certificate were sent for the chosen player.

In the spring, we held a **Character Athlete Brunch**. All recognized players, their coaches, and their administrators were invited to participate in a morning brunch and celebration of good character in sports. As this process continues yearly, the brunch includes a program with a speaker or presentation emphasizing the importance of good character and living it in all aspects of one’s life. For the last four years, we have recognized over 70 players from opposing schools each year. Our own 180+ athletes have participated annually by choosing opponents for this recognition, preparations for the brunch, and acting as hosts/hostesses for it.

2) How does the specific practice contribute to character development?

By implementing the Character Athlete process, we expanded our CE process beyond our students’ classrooms and school day. Our work at school had shown a demonstration of more compassion, respect, and caring in our school culture. However, once students stepped out of the academic day, we were not sure they were transferring these ideas to other activities in their

lives. We were also noting behaviors on our playing fields and courts that were not productive in displaying positive living and good character. Trash talk and displays of anger were encroaching into contests more frequently. By tying our Character Education initiative to the sporting activities, we helped students transfer the philosophies and virtues being taught in it to realms of real life and into their total awareness and actions.

In addition to expanding and enhancing our students' character development through this process, we have also enhanced our parents' awareness for good character. If we were emphasizing and recognizing good character in our athletes, we certainly expect it from our fans and those attending the contests. It has helped make positive living become a family and community asset.

3) What impact is the practice having on students in your school or district?

As the process has developed, our student athletes have become aware of good character in action. It has become a hallmark for our district's character education process. Its visibility has reached beyond our campus so that we are now known for our expectations of good character and the foundational emphasis we place on it. Our coaches have heard team members point out specific behaviors that were good character in action as well as some that were against what we promote. When choosing the opposing player to be recognized, our athletes are more and more able and willing to state the reasons and behaviors for choosing one or another of those opposing team members. They are getting it! It is becoming an integrated and expected component of playing the sport. The reflection and feedback they express in their choices demonstrates that they know how good character looks and is shown in sports. If close to the benches of our players, one may very well hear the discussion during the contest about which opposing player they want to receive the recognition and why he/she is being chosen. With these outcomes, we can only believe that our own students have grown to know and believe that good character can and should expand beyond the classroom into their real-life activities. We have seen improved behaviors in our own athletes, enhanced participation in the process by them, and positive verbalization from them about it.

The feedback and accolades from other schools, officials, and parents only add to our realization of its success. It has been received with acclamation by the Missouri State High School Athletic Association, *Characterplus*, the RAMS football team, and the president of the Southeast Missouri Region Football Officials Association among others. Several administrators and parents from other schools have called or written to acknowledge this practice and state their positive input about it and even how they may start it for themselves. The feedback we get from the athletes when they return to our brunch gives proof that they, too, have grown in understanding of the importance of good character in athletics. This practice has made our sporting contests more positive and more about practicing positive living than about winning at all costs. It reaches beyond our team members to their friends and families. It has impacted the athletic fields and courts of our students. The climate and culture of those events when our students are present has changed. Our coaches, athletes, and fans know our emphasis and expectations are based on demonstrating good character as a primary goal. So do our opponents. This practice has enhanced our students' awareness of the value of positive character as they live and act in all aspects of their lives. The recognitions and support this character athlete process has received have added to this awareness by demonstrating that exercising positive character is valued in the

real world. The virtues of character have become integrated practices in our students' lives not only at school but beyond their classrooms into their daily actions, behaviors, and choices on and off the playing courts and fields and into their families and our community.