SPIRIT OF THE GAME AND CHILDREN/YOUTH

Overview
While some may think that teaching concepts around Spirit of the Game (SOTG) to children and youth is difficult, in reality they often take to the concept more easily than adults do. From a very young age, children have a strong sense of what is fair and engage in playground games that require each other to adhere to the agreed upon rules. SOTG in many ways is an extension of these principles and can be explained in simple language that children and youth will understand and be able to apply.

The Role of the Coach
Coaches play a vital role in teaching children and youth new skills and creating a safe environment for everyone to enjoy. Unlike many team sports, Ultimate is an un-officiated game so it is the responsibility of all players to follow the rules, treat each other with respect and manage conflict. Coaches are responsible for not only teaching the skills and strategies of the sport, but also Spirit of the Game.

Coaches are in a position of power and need to be careful not to take over a game as an official by making calls for the players or interfering in self-officiating. When two different teams are playing, it should be left to the players to operate the game, with coaches available to clarify disputes if asked, and to address issues at the end of each point. Coaches should work with other coaches to address any issues throughout a game and should be a good role model regarding how to resolve a conflict.

While coaches should avoid directly interfering in calls made during a game, practice and development programs are great places to teach rules and the skills necessary to succeed at self-officiating. It is often useful for coaches to stop players in these settings to clarify rules and provide feedback on how to deal with a situation.

Below are age-specific recommendations on teaching and fostering Spirit of the Game and self-officiating.

Elementary school age (6-10)
At this stage, most children are being introduced to the basics of the sport for the first time.

LTAD Stages
- FUNdamentals
- Learn to Play

Key themes to emphasize
- The Golden Rule. Treat others, as you would want to be treated.
Follow the rules. It’s everyone’s responsibility to follow the rules.

Respect. Show respect to other players, coaches and teachers.

Be honest. It is everyone’s responsibility to be honest while playing so that the game can run well.

Have fun!

Additional tips for teachers and coaches

- Encourage children to ask questions to clarify what happens if they are unsure
- Expose children to players who exhibit great Spirit of the Game.

Middle school age (11-13)

At this stage the sport may start to become more serious and competitive for some athletes. This is also an age where youth are in different stages of puberty and there can be a great disparity in skills, coordination and self-esteem. The same themes from the elementary age group can be followed with some additional themes.

LTAD Stages

- Learn to Play
- Training to Play

Key themes to introduce

- Contest / Un-contest. If a foul is called, you need to choose to contest or un-contest in a respectful way.
- When you cannot agree what to do, disc generally goes back to thrower.
- It is okay to disagree. Different perspectives do not mean that people are cheating or wrong. People can honestly perceive an incident very differently.
- Communicating respectfully. It’s not what you say, but how you say it.
- BE CALM. Introduce the BE CALM strategy on how to address calls and conflicts

Breathe  don’t react straight away
Explain  what you think happened
Consider  what they think happened
Ask     other players and coaches for advice (on perspective and rules) if needed
Listen  to what everyone has had to say
Make a call loudly and clearly

High school age (14+)

At this level, youth may be playing quite competitively or just for fun. Coaches should build on the themes from the previous stages in addition to introducing new skills.

LTAD Stages
• Train to Play
• Train to Compete

Key themes
• Reinforce the BE CALM strategy.
• Reinforce and expand the theme of RESPECT. Respect yourself, your opponent and the Game.
• Rules knowledge. Ensure that players, especially competitive players, have a solid understanding of the rules.
• Responsibility. Discuss taking responsibilities for your actions as part of Spirit of the Game.
• 10 things about Spirit. Introduce USAU's 10 things you should know about Spirit.
• Competitive teams should have Spirit of the Game as part of their playbook.

TEN THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT SOTG™
1. The golden rule: treat others as you would want to be treated.

Spirited games result from mutual respect among opponents. Assume the best of your opponent. Give him or her the benefit of a doubt. You would want the same for yourself. But if you are thick-skinned, do not assume that your opponent is. Maybe you should think of this rule as, "treat others as you would have them treat your mother."

2. Control: SOTG takes real effort.

SOTG is not just some abstract principle that everyone adopts and then games run smoothly without effort. Close calls are made in tight games. Hard fouls are committed. SOTG is about how you handle yourself under pressure: how you contain your emotionality, tame your temper, and modulate your voice. If you initiate or contribute to the unraveling of spirit, the concept falls apart quickly. If you act to mend things (or at least not exacerbate the situation) by following (1) above, the game heals itself.

3. Heckling and taunting are different.

Ultimate has a long tradition of good-natured heckling. Heckles are friendly barbs, typically from non-playing spectators. Heckling can be fun, but taunting is unspirited and wrong. Harassing remarks after an opponent’s foul call or close play are NOT heckling: they are abusive taunts which create unpleasant playing conditions and often escalate to acrimonious disputes.

4. SOTG is compatible with championship play.

It is a fallacy to argue that the stakes are so important that some aspect of SOTG can
be cast aside. Time and again, great teams and star players have shown that you can bring all your competitive and athletic zeal to a game without sacrificing fair play or respect for your opponent.

5. Don't "give as you got."

There is no "eye for an eye." If you are wronged, you have no right to wrong someone in return. In the extreme case where you were severely mistreated, you may bring the issue up with a captain, tournament director, or even lodge a complaint with the governing body. If you retaliate in kind, however, a complaint may be filed against you. We recall point (1): treat others as you would have them treat you, not as they have treated you. In the end, you are responsible for you.


After a hard foul, close call, or disputed play, take a step back, pause, and take a deep breath. In the heat of competition, emotions run high. By giving yourself just a bit of time and space, you will gain enough perspective to compose yourself and concentrate on the facts involved in the dispute (was she in or out; did you hit his hand or the disc; did that pick affect the play). Your restraint will induce a more restrained response from your opponent. Conflagration averted, you may resume business as usual.

7. When you do the right thing, people notice.

When you turn the other cheek, you know you've done the right thing. You may not hear praise, there may be no standing ovation, but people do notice. Eventually, their respect for you and their appreciation of the game will grow.

8. Be generous with praise.

Compliment an opponent on her good catch. Remark to a teammate that you admire his honesty in calling himself out of bounds. Look players in the eye and congratulate them when you shake their hands after a game. These small acts boost spirit greatly, a large payoff for little time and effort.

9. Impressions linger.

Not only does the realization that your actions will be remembered for a long time serve to curb poor behavior, it can also inspire better conduct. Many old-timers enjoy the experience of meeting an elite player who remembers their first rendezvous on the field and recalls the event in detail. A good first encounter with an impressionable young player can have considerable long term positive impact.

10. Have fun.

All other things being equal, games are far more fun without the antipathy. Go hard.
Play fair. Have fun.

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