Dribbling down the field, Hunter Tam ’19 sidesteps the opposing team’s defender and moves to pass the soccer ball to his teammate. The moment before his foot makes contact, he hears an unfamiliar voice yell, “You can’t even see the goal!” Following through with the kick, he realizes that the taunt was directed at him and his team—the majority of whom are Asian American.

Like Tam, many athletes have witnessed others making derogatory remarks towards their opponents during matches. To address this issue, the North Suburban Conference (NSC) implemented a hate speech protocol in April 2018, which created an official set of guidelines for when hate speech is used by athletes during sporting events.

The NSC defines hate speech as any action that discriminates against “a protected individual or group.” The new protocol also emphasizes that hate speech prevention is more urgent than the match being played.

“With the protocol, it’s important that it’s addressed in the moment,” Tricia Betthauser, Stevenson athletic director, said. “That means sharing with an adult, stopping play and asking questions.”

This pause gives officials time to identify those who made disparaging comments and the players targeted. The policy also sets consequences for those who use hate speech, including suspension from future contests, and requires officials to notify involved players and coaches of the outcome.

“We felt that it was necessary to be proactive and spread the message of tolerance before it became a concern,” Betthauser said. “Unfortunately, there have been rare instances where an athlete says something inappropriate and offensive.”

In many cases, hate speech mocks aspects of one’s identity, such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality or religion. Due to the offensive nature of many of these comments, athletes such as varsity swimmer Beno Maya ’19 agree with the NSC’s stance against hate speech.

“You’re judging someone entirely based on their appearance and that’s uncalled for and something that needs to be addressed.”

Prior to the implementation of the NSC’s new protocol, hate speech among athletes at Central Suburban League (CSL) schools had prompted the CSL to adopt a similar protocol.

Chris Livatino, Evanston High School’s athletic director, was motivated to create the policy after discovering that racial slurs had been used against one of his athletes and that these insults were regularly used in games without his knowledge.

“I felt so useless that I spent the next couple of weeks thinking about how you could create some logical way of dealing with that type of situation,” Livatino said.

With CSL officials already having implemented such a protocol, NSC officials found that they could...
look to the CSL as guidance while crafting their own.

The focus was put on creating the most comprehensive and effective policy possible so collaboration became a focal point between the CSL and NSC as wording for the protocol was pushed forward.

The process quickly turned to include committees and subcommittees as well as continuing conversations with everyone that would be involved in the protocol’s implementation — most importantly officials who would deal with its reality during contests.

“While there was some backlash, the officials appreciated having a specific protocol on how to resolve arising situations,” Betthauser said. “The response in general has been overwhelmingly positive.”

However, some students differ on this perceived measure of success and believe that however well-intentioned the protocol is, it will ultimately turn out to be another ineffective measure on the field because it does not address all aspects of the problem.

“The climate of a team really stems from a coach above all, and if there are continuous issues with a specific team, then clearly that coach is not doing what they need to be doing to correct their students’ behavior,” Maya Korol ’19, varsity field hockey player, said. “I have had several experiences where the coach has not acted. They should be held accountable.”

Despite Korol’s criticisms of the protocol, she views it as a step in the right direction. To many student athletes such as Korol and Tam, it encourages a more inclusive and tolerant playing field across all competitions.

As a member of the Fostering Intercultural Respect and Empowerment (FIRE) club, Tam believes that it should be a point to celebrate everyone’s unique identities, including students’ racial identity, sexual orientation and gender. While athletes may still use speech that discriminates against others during sports events, the NSC’s protocol is intended to reduce the frequency of these comments.

“As stress is added to the level of competition, hate speech gets more prevalent but ultimately it’s uncalled for and that language has no place on the field,” Maya said. “The best teams don’t heckle at all.”

BY EMILY LU & OJASVI SAXENA

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