

## Preventing Bullying: Finding Your Moral Courage

In 1947 Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier as the first African-American player in Major League Baseball. Today, with every sport racially integrated, it's hard to imagine how difficult this was. In addition to death threats, Robinson found members of his own team — the Brooklyn Dodgers — didn't want to play with him because of his race.

When the Dodgers played at Crosley Field in Cincinnati in May 1947, Robinson was the target of racist taunts, jeers, and death threats. The Dodgers' captain, Pee Wee Reese, made a point of standing with his arm around Robinson as if to say, "This man is good enough to be on my team, and I stand with him."

### Pee Wee's Moral Courage

We often think of physical bravery when we talk about courage, such as a firefighter going into a burning building to rescue a sleeping child. But many of the injustices in the world happen because observers stand idly by because they lack "moral courage." Moral courage is standing up publicly for what you believe is right even when others — including sometimes your friends and teammates — don't.

Jackie Robinson's physical and psychological courage in facing the pressure that dogged his career was enormous. Pee Wee Reese showed moral courage in standing up against the prevailing norm for many in that era which valued black people less than white people.

Reese, the only Southern-raised Dodger who refused to sign a petition against Robinson, went against the grain of his upbringing to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with him. Robinson later credited Reese's support as helping him succeed against all the pressures of being the first African-American player in Major League baseball. This act of moral courage is commemorated in a statue of Reese and Robinson outside the stadium in Coney Island where the minor league Brooklyn Cyclones now play.

### Running Mindlessly With the Herd

Human beings have a deep need to be part of a group. Mostly this is a good thing, and it has helped humankind in important ways. But there is a downside to it. We can want to be part of a group so much we do things we know are wrong to avoid conflict with others in the group. And sometimes we may not directly participate in wrongdoing but stand idly by while others do bad things.

Because being ostracized from a group is so scary to many people, they are willing to compromise their ethical standards to run mindlessly with the herd. Exhibiting moral courage requires real courage.

### Standing Up Against Hazing

In recent years terrible high school hazing incidents where older athletes have violently abused younger teammates have made the news. Beyond that, less violent but otherwise degrading forms of hazing regularly occur on many high school sports teams. Each time I hear about a hazing incident, I think of Pee Wee Reese and wonder why no one on these teams tapped their moral courage and stood up for the harassed players, as Reese did for Jackie Robinson. If those teams had any Triple-Impact Competitors on them, they would have defended the abused players.

Sometimes standing up against hazing requires bold action, which can put you crossways with teammates. You may just have to take a vocal and public stand and say, “This is not okay. I’m not going to allow my teammates to be abused.” But often a small gesture, or asking a pointed question, can lead people to reevaluate what they are doing and stop harmful behavior. Still, even that requires being willing to risk being unpopular with your own teammates.

But that is the price of moral courage — and why it is so important in a world where most people can’t find theirs.

### Using Your Power to Improve Your School Community

With 12 All-Star appearances, 12 Gold Glove Awards, four National League batting titles, and 3,000 hits, Roberto Clemente was one of the greatest baseball players ever. But what people remember most about Clemente is his work *off* the field.

On New Year’s Eve, 1972, Clemente boarded a plane loaded with food, clothing, and medical supplies bound for Nicaragua, which had experienced a devastating earthquake. The loaded-down plane Clemente boarded didn’t inspire confidence, but he told his wife, “When your time comes, it comes... And babies are dying. They need these supplies.”

Shortly after take-off, the plane crashed in the ocean, killing all five on board. Because of Clemente’s courage and sacrifice, high schools, stadiums, bridges, hospitals, and Major League Baseball’s humanitarian award bear his name. What does Clemente’s story have to do with you?

### Athletes Have Power

Many high school athletes have status because of what they do on the field. Unfortunately, in many schools a “jock culture” exists in which athletes use their status and influence solely for their own benefit. Whether you realize it or not, you have an incredible opportunity to wield your power on campus in productive ways to make your life and the lives of others around you better.

### Mentor Younger Athletes

If you reach out to less skilled or younger teammates, or to JV athletes if you are on varsity, you will have a huge impact on how they feel about themselves and on their confidence on the playing field. They may also remember and appreciate your kindness for a lifetime. This might entail simply saying hello to them, showing interest in them on campus or before practice, or “taking them under your wing” to mentor them throughout the season.

### Include the Excluded

High school is a difficult time for many students who feel alienated from the school community. Students, including athletes, often break into cliques that leave many teens feeling isolated and left out. But it doesn't have to be that way.

Joe Ehrmann, a former NFL Pro Bowl lineman who is now a high school football coach in Baltimore, was the subject of a book by Jeffrey Marx called *Season of Life*. Ehrmann's team has a rule: Nobody eats alone.

If a member of the Gilman Greyhounds football team, often one of the top teams in the country, sees a student eating by himself in the cafeteria, he is required to go and sit with the student or invite him to join the player at his table. Athletes at Gilman make the school better by including those who might otherwise be excluded.

Think about it: when a friend is kind to you, it's nice. When a high-status person you don't know well is kind to you, it can change your entire feeling about school.

### Help Create an Anti-Bullying Culture

Half of all students report being bullied at some point by the time they leave high school. Ninety percent of gay teens say they were bullied in the previous year. Many say bullying — exerting power through violence, threat of violence, name-calling, insults, gossip, putdowns, trying to damage a person's relationships, or cyberbullying — is the biggest problem in their lives.

The negative impact of bullying — for the bullied, for bullies, and for bystanders — can be long lasting and sometimes tragic. Here are some ideas to help create a bully-free school culture.

**Set an Example.** Sometimes athletes bully teammates or other kids. So look at your own behavior, and if you are bullying someone, stop. If you have friends who bully, let them know you think bullying is an act of weakness, and that true strength is demonstrated by treating every student in the school with respect.

**Respond.** If you see someone bullying another student, here are some things you can do that won't escalate the problem.

- Don't use or threaten the use of force. This often makes things worse. Trust me on this.
- Assess the situation to see if you can say something without putting yourself or others in danger. You might simply ask a question such as "What's going on?" A question can be disarming and more effective than aggressively confronting a bully.
- Talk with a trusted school official about the best way to solve this situation.
- Offer your support to the bullied student and let him know you don't approve of the way he is being treated. This literally can be life saving, as bullied individuals often feel very alone and despairing.

**Join School-Wide Anti-Bullying Efforts.** Many schools have anti-bullying initiatives, and some state laws require them. If your school has one, get involved with it. If not, talk with school administrators to see if one can be started. Having athletes involved in leadership positions can help such an effort succeed.

Bullying is not even good for the bully. Bullying does not help people develop strong relationships or succeed in life. Having a strong anti-bullying culture in your school can help bullies correct their behavior before it ruins their lives.

### Support Other School Activities

Many school activities do not draw the kind of crowds sporting events draw. Athletes showing up at a play or a concert can mean a lot to the involved students. Having the varsity support the JV team, or the boys' team support the girls' team in the same sport (and vice versa) is also a great program builder.

### Get Involved in Community Service

A life lived only for oneself is a lonely life. People who help others tend to be happier and more successful than people who don't. High school is a great place to begin a life of serving others, and it can help bring the school community together.

If there is already a school-wide community service initiative, get involved with it. If there isn't such an initiative, consider starting one, and involve non-athletes to help break down divisions within the school.

Fortunately, examples abound of high school community service projects:

- Organize canned food drives for homeless shelters
- Collect stuffed animals for a children's hospital
- Volunteer with Special Olympics or Ronald McDonald House
- Hold sports clinics for younger athletes
- Coach or officiate games of younger athletes
- Visit the elderly in retirement communities

### Student-Athlete Council

Get involved with your school's student-athlete council to give feedback to the administration and initiate and plan activities. If your school doesn't have one, talk with the athletic director to see about starting one.

### Athletes and Their Legacies

One of Roberto Clemente's friends remembered him this way. "I think the bottom line for him was trying to show other[s] ... if you dedicate yourself to a cause, you can be a winner."

When you are done with your sport, how will others — teammates, opponents, the excluded classmate, the grade-schooler who showed up to your game, your parents — remember you?

