

## Teaching Social Justice Through Soccer and Sports

By **Jim Riggio**

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August 15, 2020



(Photo by Ross A Benson)

By Michael Kodama

Growing up in sports provided me with an opportunity to learn about people. I started playing baseball when I was 9 years old and within a year was also playing soccer. I grew up idolizing Jackie Robinson (loved the Dodgers) and Lou Gehrig (the son of German immigrants who was a great soccer player who became a famous baseball player) and idolized other professional athletes. As I became involved coaching soccer and then baseball, the focus was always on building the team and working together regardless of color. Life should be like the game when color does not matter. It never occurred to me that we should be any different. However, racism and racial slurs did occur on and off the field. At Burroughs High School, it was an issue that we had to deal with and it was not pleasant. Yet – there was no way I would let anyone disrespect our boys as we competed at the high school level. At the

same time, I wanted to make sure our teams also respected their opponents and stayed away from racism and racial slurs. It does not belong in sports...it does not belong anywhere.

These are challenging times. Across the country, we have been dealing with COVID-19 and now nation and worldwide protests against racial inequality. In sports, the 11 professional teams in the Los Angeles area have come together to form a partnership called "The Alliance." It is a five-year commitment to increase sport programs for young people in communities of color. The goal is to create positive changes and promote social justice. The Alliance is working with the LA 84 Foundation and the Play Equity Fund in an effort to help change inequality in the system. Still – this issue is bigger. What does this mean to our youth and how does this apply to our high schools? How does it apply to high school soccer? How can this be applied everywhere, across all of our high schools?



Burroughs played in a 2019 summer game against a team from Colombia. (Photo by Ross A Benson)

Sports can play an important role in social justice. We can go back in our history and see how Jackie Robinson integrated baseball. We can look at how much we learn in sports, learning to be part of a team with diverse backgrounds. We can also look at sports to see how far we still need to go. In 1987, Al Campanis of the Dodgers interview on Nightline cost him his job and made people really look at racial issues and stereotypes. During the 2017 World Series, the Houston Astros not only cheated in a sign stealing scandal, but also showed we have a long way to go regarding racial issues as a member of the Houston Astros team, Yuli Gurriel, making racist gestures and mouthing a racial epithet towards Yu Darvish of the Dodgers on international and national television. In 2019, the Astros again were in trouble as Assistant General Manager Brandon Taubman was fired for targeting a female sports reporter with inappropriate sexist remarks. Is this

sexism? Racism? Ignorance? or both? Is this systemic or an isolated incident? Unfortunately, this type of behavior makes it way down to high school and the youth leagues.

While we are not perfect, we must be aware and try our best to eliminate racism and discrimination while supporting and educating our student athletes. At the high school, we faced situations with abusive fans and players using a variety of racial gestures and slurs that are not suitable for publication. There are too many high school athletes who behave like Yuli Gurriel. Some of the comments coming out of the stands from their parents and fans are an embarrassment and I am sure – influence the behavior of high school students. At the youth level, I saw this happen as young as six years old. Definitely, an issue with parents when their six-year-old son is making racist remarks on a soccer field.

Where do we start? Begin with the high school athletic code. High school student athletic codes identify the rights and responsibilities of participating students. This means showing proper respect to coaches, officials, opponents, captains, teachers, and administrators, observing school rules and regulations and team rules. A few years ago, some of my players used examples of negative behavior from high level and very prominent elected officials and asked if they could say these racist and sexist remarks and play for us. I told them that this type of behavior was unacceptable and that this person would not play for me as a member of this high school soccer team.



(Photo by Ross A Benson)

I think we can start with our own personal beliefs. I really like a recent statement by former UCLA Bruin and Los Angeles Laker Kareem Abdul Jabbar who said to “make a friend who does not look like you. And then make another friend.” For me as a coach, I want my players to feel comfortable and to know that I, the coaching staff and all of their teammates have their back on this issue. We want our players to love and

respect the game, battle and work for each other as a family and feel that color does not matter on our team. It is all about giving maximum effort – even more than playing time. It is about each student athlete using their gift to help the team. During a season, we go through a lot and learn about each other. We develop a common goal and work together as a team to break down barriers. We see this happen every year on our team. It is more than soccer. I think we can all be proactive and take steps to rectify a wrong.

One of the best experiences that I had involved a ride home from a tournament. One of the parents invited the entire team to a Korean BBQ in Koreatown. As we were driving, the boys in my car all called home to tell their parents. What was amazing was that each took turns to call home – in Portuguese, Spanish, Korean and Armenian. They were so excited to hear each other speak a different language and talked about it not only on the way home but also at practice. It became part of the team as they acknowledged, respected, and celebrated culture, differences and commonalities. The students shared stories about their backgrounds even though their primary language at home may not be English. The team recognized that many of their parents were immigrants and it became an important part of our team as they bonded together, learned about each other and their backgrounds, creating a close-knit team that worked and played together on and off the field. Making friends on the soccer team enhanced performance on the field and resulted in friendships that still exist today.

In high school soccer, we struggle with racism and it requires coaches to remain vigilant and yet be understanding. In the heat of the moment it can be very ugly. I have seen teams fall apart because of this. I have seen some terrible situations involving racism that screams for someone to show leadership, understanding and compassion. Sometimes it is readily apparent and other times it is covert. It can be systemic, symbolic or involve use of negative stereotypes. It can be done on purpose with malice or it can be inadvertent and require a dialogue or education. It can involve one or both schools.

Soccer is a world sport and recent actions demonstrates that social justice is important at all levels. Many people do not know that breaking down these barriers is happening now. Only recently did France integrate its team with stars like Zinedine Zidane resulting in a World Cup victory in 1998. In Ecuador, Yugoslavian Coach Dusan Draskovic and then Colombian Coach Francisco Maturana insisted on an integrated Ecuadorian national team that resulted in Ecuador finally making its first World Cup appearance in 2001. Germany recognized equity as an issue and under the leadership of Jurgen

Klinsmann in 2006 embraced a new “Die Mannschaft” national team that included sons of immigrants from many countries. Even now, shameful incidents involving racist chants from fans at soccer stadiums in Italy and in Eastern Europe still need to be addressed. We need to work together and do our part to eliminate systematic racism in soccer.



(Photo by Ross A Benson)

Here at the local level, we still need to address cultural sensitivity while having zero tolerance for racism on the field and yes – in the stands – which is often even worse than on the soccer field. For example, in a game at Hart High School, their coaches took immediate action to address an issue that showed their level of commitment to zero tolerance for racism that was widely appreciated by our entire team. Throughout my years in high school soccer, I have worked with other coaches who feel the same way and come down hard on any racist behavior. We get help from referees who act as our eyes and ears on the field and often act as our first line of defense towards this type of behavior. We too at Burroughs have had to address and educate our players and parents regarding social justice and work to eliminate racism towards individuals and other schools. While this is never a pleasant experience, it should not be tolerated and must be addressed immediately on the field and after the game to be an effective learning tool that we hope results in positive moral, ethical and social justice changes. There is no easy answer and it does not happen overnight. It takes time to make this part of your team’s culture. This often involves not only the student athlete and coaching staff, but parents, fans, other students, referees, faculty, staff and administrators as well.

We have come a long way yet have a long way to go. If we look at the current movement and protests around the country and world, I feel that by working vigorously for freedom and justice for Blacks, by extension, we are advocating for all people. Take a moment to listen to Martin Luther King and his “I have a dream” speech. While we may not recognize or feel this in our community, for far too long some communities have disproportionately

endured violence or been victims of social injustice. This is an important life lesson for everyone in sports. It is more than our student athletes. Just think if you had a camera on you while watching a game – is this the type of behavior that you want to show to everyone? Are you an example for your son and others? If not – seriously think about changing your behavior. I often have a difficult time watching some youth and high school soccer games with other parents and fans. While people may have a different view, my perspective is that this is about equal opportunity for everyone and most of all taking care of our student athletes.

I hope the concept of social justice, equity and fairness stays with our students and that they apply these life lessons that they learned in high school soccer for the rest of their lives. I hope other schools and soccer coaches place the same emphasis on this issue as they lead their own programs. I am happy to say that almost all of my colleagues in the Pacific League and in other schools believe in equity, social justice and fair play even more than winning one soccer game. Throughout my years in soccer, I learned a lot. I learned working in a variety of communities and continue to learn today, striving to be better. I hope we all strive to be better at this.

*Michael Kodama was the boys soccer coach at John Burroughs High School for over 30 years. He has been involved with soccer at the high school, club and recreational levels. He is a member of the United Soccer Coaches Association and was a Board Member of the Southern California High School Soccer Coaches Association. Professionally, he has taught at USC, Cal Poly Pomona, University of California and at UCLA. He is an Urban Planner who has worked with a number of communities throughout Southern California and the United States.*