

“illegitimi non carborundum”

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“Redemption AYSO Style”

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We had a disappointing time of it in May with an AYSO match. My mistake was keeping our team on the far side of Merck Field, opposite the folding-chair parents, unaware of the nasty chatter until after the game. Why do folks waste time being self-destructively hostile? Why? Hostility roils up from fear. Why so insecure? Friends: your unhappiness is your choice. Don't inflict it on us. Several parents from the visiting team belittled, taunted, swore at our players, mocking the referee. These parents scolded their own kids for mistakes. Surprise, speech reveals souls. They even encouraged cheating. On the field, several of their kids mirrored their crude parents, ridiculing our kids, swearing at them. Our young referee ended up crying in her father's car.

Back when our daughter played, fans during one heated game were getting ridiculous. It wasn't just their nasty remarks, they didn't know what they were talking about. I couldn't take it anymore. I got up and sat in the empty bleachers on the other side. One of my friends overheard some of the opponent parents asking: “Who's that over there, him in the fedora?” My friend couldn't resist himself. “Him? That's the Penn State scout.” Buzz buzz went the crowd, our parents giggling. We all need to chill out.

I experienced club teams conducting an experiment. One game a season had to be played with parents muzzled in complete silence. Even the coaches were muted. It was weird yet refreshing. Do they still do this? AYSO counts on parents behaving. So, I'm working on my welcome speech to the adult fans when the occasion requires: “Reverend Rodent is going to address you: If you're not here to encourage and support the kids, leave; If you're not here to applaud good play on both sides, leave; If you're not here to help the kids on the teams build up their character, leave; If you're here because only the score matters, leave.”

This isn't the English Premier League, its AYSO, an organization that promotes the best interests of kids.

I started playing in 1965 -- had to give it up seven years ago. Gravity, time wins. That, and a cerebral cortex stroke while playing. Despite the hundreds of games I've played, I cannot remember any final score. I may not remember the scores. What I remember are my teammates, coaches, some great plays, some silly blunders.

Before the starting whistle I also would like to announce: “You kids out on the field, if you can't be good sports, you don't belong on the field.”

Still, better than wanting them to leave is wanting them to get on board with the good guys.

It would be a good speech for this game of daily life.

No surprise, my team handled it better than I did. Who's the immature one? Kids don't brood as much. Plus, to be honest, I've been in a funk. I've let much of this abnormal climate of cruelty and negativity seep into my soul. Like a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, when squeezed, it squishes out sideways. Frustrated, I sent several snarky emails, allowing anger to squeeze out. I cannot remember the last time

I enjoyed a good belly laugh. Gracious mirth has been missing of late, an absence of joy. Souls require laughter, more joy -- illegitimi non carborundum! How to begin? Commentator Michael Smerconish quoted a sign in his guidance counselor Father's office: "If you could kick the person in the pants responsible for most of your trouble, you wouldn't sit for a month."

I may help coach a team, but my kids coached me. We broke field regulations the first practice after the ugly match. Our Corgi, Gwendolyn, joined the team. Therapy dog time! The kids laughed trying to get the soccer ball away from her paws and jaw. Gwendolyn loved the belly rubs. Flop and roll over, tongue hanging out sidewise. Yes, the kids coached me that hour. Sweet redemption.

I received this gift of more joy over Memorial Weekend when we worshipped with my first congregation. Thirty-five years since, and they remain kind and beautiful people.

This unsportsmanlike nonsense could have discouraged my kids. Instead, it energized them for the following Saturday's game against the best (and nice) visiting team from the same town. Golly, did it show. Thanks, nasty team, you banded my kids together. Our kids did themselves proud. They made the visiting team work for their win. Best, everybody behaved and had fun. Even the adults.