

May 9, 2008

Dear Parents/Players:

As all of you are aware by now, my privilege as coach of the middle school baseball team has been suspended for the remainder of the season. The suspension comes as a result of an anonymous email that was sent to the MIAA suggesting an incident of “hazing” during baseball practices. Since I was given no chance to share my side of the story, you may have heard any number of versions. This is a letter of clarification.

In 2007, following some silly mistake made by a player during practice, I had mentioned “hot ovens” to the team as a reference to my past. “Boy, oh boy, if this happened when I was growing up, you’d get the “hot oven” for sure!” Players curiously asked what the hot oven was. After telling them, the players overwhelmingly reacted, “We should do that, coach!”

For a change of pace, and with enthusiasm as a fun activity, the players partook in the hot oven. After that, it more or less became theirs. At no time did I physically participate in this activity. Following practice each day, we’d review the ‘hot oven nominees’ (more often than not, some comical miscue made – i.e. tripping while running sprints, missing a base during base running drills, going to home plate without a helmet, etc.). We’d then have a “kangaroo court” (peer governing) to determine who would have to go through. Again, I heard no opposition from players, and certainly no parental intervention, and still further, no reference to “hazing” in any way, shape, or form. Since it was done at the conclusion of practice, and while parents were present, and I never heard any opposition, I never even gave a second thought that this activity constituted any wrongdoing. The tradition almost became a superstition among the players that if we did not do a hot oven, bad luck might come our way. We never lost a game that season (13-0) – as a matter of fact, one player pitched a “perfect game” the day following his hot oven, so players almost *wanted* to get one with hopes of receiving good fortune as well.

When the 2008 season started, at the returning players’ request, the hot oven continued as a staple of practice. Never was the hot oven given as a punishment for errors, striking out, being caught stealing bases, etc, but rather a fun, seemingly harmless team tradition.

Most importantly, three weeks into the 2008 season, I caught wind of a parent’s unfavorable interpretation of the hot oven. Immediately, without hesitation or question, the practice of the hot oven was terminated. Approximately three weeks following the final hot oven, and just after the Charlton game, the MIAA anonymously received the email.

I enjoy coaching. I think that I bring a lot of knowledge of the game to the players. Over the years, I think the players have learned enough to prepare them for the next level. In that, I feel I have been successful. It is unfortunate that I am unable to continue coaching my players this season.

Sincerely,

Dean Bennett