

December 2009 Sports News

Newsletter of the Utah Salt Lake City Area Sports

Celebrating 50 Years of Service!

If anyone deserves a dedicated issue of *Sports News* it is Ron Gerber, recently released Utah Area Sports Director. Ron was first called to serve as a member of the Taylorsville Stake Sports Committee in 1958. He's held callings in Church Sports ever since, including his Area calling since 1980. The rest is history – fifty years of history! Ron is a genial, but driven leader, whose passion for Church Sports is infectious. We thought it appropriate to interview Ron as he enters a new chapter in his life.

Do you have a personal interest in sports?

I don't consider myself a particularly good athlete, although I love sports. As a young man my ward team took 2nd place in the All Church Tournament in Basketball and I was a starter playing guard. That was a great experience. I also love softball and have pitched a lot of fast-pitch softball. In fact they used to have All-Star teams in the Salt Lake County program, and I was a starting pitcher going against the mighty Metropolitan League championship team. I held my own in the three innings I played, but we lost the game. So it is, in sports.

Probably my most satisfying experiences in sports has been as the coach of many Young Men's teams through the years. I still cherish a picture in the Salt Lake Tribune of one team I coached that went to the All Church Tournament in the late 1950s. So I guess I do have a very direct interest in sports.

How has Church Sports changed in the past 50 years?

Today we have a much better understanding of why we have the Church Sports program and the spiritual purposes it serves. Thirty years ago when I was called to the Area position we were mostly interested in the activity itself, such as having good, high quality tournaments, and getting teams in sharp uniforms and publicity about the tournaments. Since then we've evolved to the point where we realize that the primary purposes of Church Sports is to assist members and leaders in fulfilling the mission of the church – to "Invite All To Come Unto Christ and Be Perfected in Him." I think that's a much finer approach. The way we do that is to

dramatically increase the training at the local level, not just in how to officiate the game, but in the spiritual power of the program to transform lives through fellowship and to invite less active and friends of other faiths to join in. A visual representation of this change in focus is the use of posters for tournaments that feature a picture of the Savior along with statements relative to the group invited to the tournament, such as Aaronic Priesthood, Young Women, Relief Society, and Melchizedek Priesthood brethren. This relates the Church Sport activity to the purpose of the organization and makes it very clear what we're all about.

What has been the most gratifying thing about your service in Area Sports?

The constant flow of testimonies reflecting how lives have been positively influenced through their participation in the program. We have found that it's easier to invite friends and less active members into the cultural hall than directly into the chapel. Once we get people in our buildings and they feel the Spirit there, many become more accepting of the gospel teachings.

Any specific examples?

Two are illustrative:

- A less active woman was invited to participate in a stake volleyball program. After the first night of play she went to her neighbor, the Relief Society President, and said to her, "Last night you ladies read from a poster that spoke of the Savior. That was really impressive, can you tell me more?" The good Relief Society President explained what it was all about. Bottom line, two years later the Relief Society president called and told me in a very emotional voice that she and her husband had been to the temple that day to witness the sealing of this woman and her family for time and eternity.
- Several years ago I was watching a Region Volleyball Match and a team had won the first set. In the second set they were leading and it was game point. The ball was hit by the opponents and was called out-of-bounds by the official. That would have

secured the match for the team. But a young man raised his hand and said, "No, I touched the ball." The opposing team went on to win that set. In the final set the very same thing happened with the same young man taking responsibility. Of course his team lost the match. I was so impressed by this display of good sportsmanship that I called the stake president to congratulate him on having such an outstanding team represent his stake. It turns out that the young man who made the honor calls was not a member of the Church. His actions reflected good coaching and leadership. Even the winning team was subdued at their victory, because they knew they could have been declared the losers had it not been for the honesty and integrity of this individual. Can you imagine a finer example of Church Sports displaying the values we cherish?

What has been your biggest challenge through the years?

The difficulty in communicating the purpose of the program to all our Priesthood Leaders. The particular challenge for the Sports Program is that it is not embraced by all. For example, some leaders had negative experiences with sports in their own youth. Others have issues with poor sportsmanship within their stake programs. In a number of cases a leader has withdrawn the program because of the poor conduct of a couple of players, thereby denying the majority of members the opportunity for a quality program because of the bad actions of a few. It would be better for these leaders to work out the problem with the few separately rather than using a broad brush.

What is the best way to manage sportsmanship?

I think that the stake leadership has to establish expectations and standards for the program and then enforce them fairly and uniformly. This requires that their leaders, including officials, be trained in the rules of each particular sport. It takes a lot of training for the administrator as well as the officials and coaches. When the program is on firm ground, so that refs officiate consistently, then it's easier for the players to be good sports because they are treated fairly. Of course it helps if each season is preceded by a fireside or letter from the stake president that outlines the spiritual purpose of Church Sports and that encourages and requires participants to control their tempers and play in the proper spirit.

When you have someone who consistently displays poor sportsmanship, what do you do?

Of course it's up to each stake to decide, but I can tell you what worked in my stake. When I was high councilman responsible for Church Sports we set the standards that if a person was disqualified from a game for bad sportsmanship he or she had to go through an interview with the bishop and stake president before they could be reinstated. This made a dramatic change in our stake, as evidenced by the fact that wives and families started coming to watch the games whereas before they were too embarrassed by their husband's belligerence to even come to the game.

What advice do you have as you leave?

Going forward I hope that stake presidents will take an active role in keeping this vital program active and alive in their stakes. This requires that they conduct regular priesthood interviews with those who are called in their stake as leaders in Church Sports. The Agent Stake President in the Coordinating Councils can serve as a vital catalyst in helping stakes within the Council stay connected for tournaments and activities.

What's in your heart as you're released?

Mixed emotions. I feel sad that I'm not able to continue the work I love, including watching all those dedicated individuals who participate and administer the program. I'm going to badly miss these associations. But at 76 years of age there are other things I need to concentrate on, including family challenges. I have 7 children, 25 grandchildren, and 21 great-grandchildren. My 4 oldest children have multiple sclerosis, and one of them is confined to a care center totally disabled. I need to use my energy and time working in their behalf. So I pass the torch with confidence in those who succeed me. I am blessed to have served.

A fond farewell...

Marquita and Ron Gerber were honored at a reception at the home of Harold Turley, new Utah Area Sports Director, on November 18, 2009. More than 60 people showed up to say goodbye. Many contributed articles for a memory book and had their photos taken with Ron. It was a fitting tribute to a remarkable man and his fifty years of service to Church Sports in Utah. Ron – we wish you well!

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