

Pickleball Bullies – Are Seniors Susceptible?

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It's sad but true: in pickleball — as in life — one will occasionally run into bullies.

When I was a young man, I generally ignored the playground bully until he crossed the line. Then I would send him running home to his mother clutching a bloody nose. These days, however, taking matters into my own hands is not an appropriate option. So I have developed other ways of dealing with bullies.

As a professional athletic coach, I have been taught how to spot bullies and how to deal with them. In pickleball where the age is closer to 90 than to nine, one might be surprised that there are bullies at all. But trust me, they are there. And many seniors either do not know how to deal with them or are simply too afraid to say anything when the bully struts into the room and starts bossing everybody around.

Recognizing Pickleball Bullies

In pickleball, as in other sports, bullies tend to crave titles and other official trappings. Since they are weak and fearful on the interior, they like to cover their exteriors with official titles and positions. Be very careful about putting them in positions of authority for they are more likely to use these positions to bully others than to be good ambassadors for your club or sport. Sadly, many good pickleball groups have been destroyed by bullies while well-meaning directors sat by and did nothing to stop them.

Pickleball Bullies Make Rules

The first signs of bullying often revolve around rules. Bullies like to make rules. But even more than making them, bullies like to enforce rules. In fact, they LOVE to enforce the rules. Unfortunately, “the rules” usually means “their rules” and they are prepared to drive away everyone who questions their rules. Whether it’s about paddles, playing conditions or nothing more than determining who plays on which court, the bully will be there to tell players exactly how things MUST be done.

Bullies Crave Attention

As a coach, the first thing I do with a bully is make it clear that he/she is not in charge. Step 1 is to ignore him/her. When the bully speaks, I do not respond. If the bully insists on getting my attention, I move to Step 2; I say: “Thank you. Right now we are doing it this way. We can talk about this later.” If necessary, I will even move to Step 3; when the bully says it must be done THIS way, I will instruct the players to do it THAT way. At every step along the way, I ignore the bully and address my attention and comments to the group. Then, at the end of the day, when nobody

else is around to hear us, I will give the bully clear instructions: either stop bullying or stay away. There is no room for bullies on my courts.

Bullies React Inappropriately

There is nothing in this world that gives bullies away faster than the way they react to recognition. Pickleball bullies, like all bullies, simply cannot control themselves when somebody in the group, especially a perceived enemy, receives recognition for good work they have done. While a rational person will typically react with applause for their fellow picklers, bullies lash out irrationally and will often challenge or criticize the person offering the recognition. After that, they will attack the recipient. And if that fails to get them the attention they feel should be directed towards them, they will work within the group to undermine both parties.

Unfortunately, this behavior causes much dissension within the group and often does great harm both the club and to the sport of pickleball.

Dealing with Pickleball Bullies

The best defence against pickleball bullies lies in having professionally trained staff. Whether your programs are run by volunteers or pickleball coaches, everybody involved should be trained to recognize pickleball bullies. They should also be familiar with procedures for reporting bullying to facility managers.

My own method is to record every incident of bullying in my Coaching Journal. I record every nasty thing the bully says, I take note of every lie they utter and I jot down every action I take to correct this behavior.

Then, when the time comes, I use this meticulous record against the bully to bring a swift end to their nonsense.

I love pickleball too much to stand by and watch it destroyed by bullies who strut onto the court and insist that everything be done according to their rules. The last time I checked, successful sports have slightly different rules at every level of play. To deny this and to say that there is only one way to play pickleball everywhere is just silly. Only a true bully would say such a thing; only a true bully would believe it.

At the end of the day, coaching staff must be in charge of their own programs and they must run those programs in a way that is inclusive of as many players as possible. If driving off a bully or two is the only way to ensure that dozens of other players will enjoy themselves, then that is undoubtedly the best course of action. Otherwise your pickleball program will eventually dwindle to the point where the only players left will be the bully, his/her submissive followers and a disappointed program director.
