

Helping young athletes learn right from wrong

BALTIMORE - Catholic teachers and coaches have an important role to play in teaching student athletes about moral and ethical lines that must not be crossed, an official of Major League Baseball told participants in the National Catholic Educational Association convention April 12 in Baltimore.

“Catholic schools are not afraid to ask a lot of their students,” said Joe Garagiola Jr., senior vice president of baseball operations for Major League Baseball. “But when you ask a lot you can get extraordinary results.”

Mr. Garagiola, son of the famous catcher and baseball commentator, admitted that there are pressures on coaches, teachers, parents and the athletes themselves at every level of play - to win, to keep student athletes eligible to play, to get more playing time for their child and to succeed at any cost.

But he suggested that other sports could benefit from a system similar to the minor leagues in baseball, which he called “a pretty humbling experience, where you’re not in the nicest hotels and there are lots of 4 a.m. wake-up calls.”

“Many of the problems in the other sports stem from the sense of entitlement that their athletes bring to the sport,” he said.

But Mr. Garagiola said coaches and teachers must help athletes learn early in their careers that they may have “a special talent or a special gift ... but that does not make them a special person.”

“They must learn to distinguish between what they can do and who they are,” he

said, adding that many who want to consider themselves special are “enabled by their friends, by their parents, and then by the boosters and alumni” at the college level.

Mr. Garagiola called such an approach to sports “a slippery slope” and said it should come as no surprise when athletes with that attitude do “completely inappropriate and wrong things.”

“Early on was the time to set them in the right direction,” he added. “The great benefit of being part of the Catholic school system is that you don’t have to be shy about affirming that some things are right and some things are wrong.”

Mr. Garagiola said a recent survey by the Josephson Institute of Ethics in Los Angeles offered both good news and bad news about ethics among high school athletes.

He said 95 percent of the athletes said their coaches set a good example, but nearly two-thirds of all athletes - and fully 70 percent of football players - said they had cheated on an exam in the past year.

Nearly one-third of the male athletes thought it would be OK for a coach to ask for an academically successful athlete to be held back in middle school in order for him to be older and stronger than the other students when he gets to high school, Mr. Garagiola said. “It’s depressing that they would think this is OK,” he added.

Although many young people see professional athletes as role models, Mr. Garagiola recalled basketball player Charles Barkley’s statement on an old TV commercial that “I am not a role model.”

Barkley’s point was that “the real role models should be the parents and teachers,” Mr. Garagiola said. “If he was truly their role model then someone else had failed.”

Mr. Garagiola opened his talk by listing the Catholic schools where he was educated - St. Raphael the Archangel Grade School in St. Louis, St. Pius X Grade School in New York, Archbishop Stepinac High School in White Plains, N.Y., University of Notre Dame in Indiana and Georgetown Law School in Washington - and said addressing an audience of Catholic school teachers gave him “a flashback to second grade.”

He also told stories about legendary catcher and family friend Yogi Berra that he said showed the natural connection between sports and faith.

As he watched one player go through a particularly elaborate series of signs of the cross and other devotional signs before stepping up to bat, Mr. Berra told the batter, “Why don’t we just let God watch the game?”