

The Appearance of Impropriety

Our Character Corner columns usually deal with developing moral and performance characteristics in young people involved in baton twirling. But as parents, coaches and judges we have an obligation to DEMONSTRATE those characteristics as well - particularly those involved in judging.

One of the great things about baton twirling is that it is a sort of “family” and we are bound together by an activity which we all enjoy. Twirlers often comment that the best part of twirling is seeing their friends from all over at a competition – and teachers and judges feel the same way. It is natural to want to socialize – especially with someone you don’t see very often. However, it seems that the lines between professionalism and socializing sometimes get blurred.

Consider these scenarios (all of which are true)

-A judge is invited to officiate at a state competition and he/she immediately posts a Facebook message announcing that she will be coming to XYZ state soon and can’t wait to see all her twirling friends. Hmmm – if you are not one of her “twirling friends” are you wondering which other twirlers competing for the state title might be close friends with them?

-A judge is invited to officiate at a Miss Majorette competition in another state and spends the night before at the home of a good twirling friend. The next day, she judges the daughter of that same twirling friend in the pageant.

-A judge officiates a division at a Regional competition on Saturday – and on Saturday evening, the judge posts a picture of herself with a group at dinner – including one of the girls she just judged that day.

-A teacher is regularly on staff at an annual summer camp where twirlers spend a week practicing their routines over and over preparing for national competition. For years, the teacher consistently practices with many of the same twirlers – then often judges them at the national competition the next month.

-A judge serves as an official at a state competition, then stays the next 2 days to do private lessons with the students of the contest sponsor – twirlers he/she just judged in the state contest.

-A teacher has worked closely with a twirler for 5 years, but eventually the student decides to work with a different coach. 1 year later the original teacher judges that twirler in a national competition.

Do any of these situations make you stop and think? Do any of them cause you some concern? Any of these situations could be perfectly innocent – and undoubtedly in every single case, the judge would be certain that his/her decisions were not affected by their contact with the twirler(s) involved. But would an outside observer have the same confidence?

In the legal world, there is a term called “the appearance of impropriety” and courtroom judges are bound by a specific code of ethics. Legal publications say “Public confidence in the judiciary is eroded by improper conduct and conduct that creates the appearance of impropriety.” It doesn’t have to BE improper – it just has to LOOK that way for an observer to lose confidence. It is, perhaps, something that twirling judges should also consider when determining their actions. Twirling judging is ALWAYS subjective – it is the nature of our sport. But judges should always try to make their decisions from a position as objective as possible. As one parent said “It is the appearance of impropriety that undermines trust.”