

Opinion



A Kansas Viewpoint

Let's not go too far

By The Wichita Eagle

The Fred Phelps family cult is an embarrassment to Kansas and an ongoing torment to grieving military families. But laws designed to rein in the funeral protests by Topeka's Westboro Baptist Church must pass constitutional muster — and, by this measure, a recently announced effort to deny the Phelps basic legal rights is highly suspect.

In response to the Phelps clan's ghoulish anti-gay protests, many states have passed "time and place" restrictions on funeral protests. The Phelps are challenging several of those laws, including Missouri's, as infringements of their free speech rights.

The Kansas Legislature failed last session to pass its own funeral protest bill, largely out of fears that if the Phelps successfully challenged the law, Kansas would be forced to pay their legal fees.

It's a valid concern. No one wants to help finance the Phelps' travels with taxpayer money. So, what to do?

Attorney General Phill Kline and a group of state legislators want to revive the Kansas protest bill next session. They have also enlisted U.S. Rep. Todd Tiahrt, R-Goddard, who is proposing a federal law that would prevent those who challenge funeral protest laws (read: the American Civil Liberties Union or the Phelps) from being able to collect attorney fees if they win, as required under federal civil rights law.

Unfortunately, this effort goes too far. The Phelps or anyone else deserve the right to challenge these laws in court — and, if successful, to have the loser pay legal fees.

... Would a Kansas funeral protest law hold up in court? It's still unclear. But for grieving families' sake, it's worth a try, provided it strikes a reasonable balance between the free speech rights of protesters and the privacy rights of mourners.

Let's not go overboard, though, by trying to also limit the ability to challenge such laws.

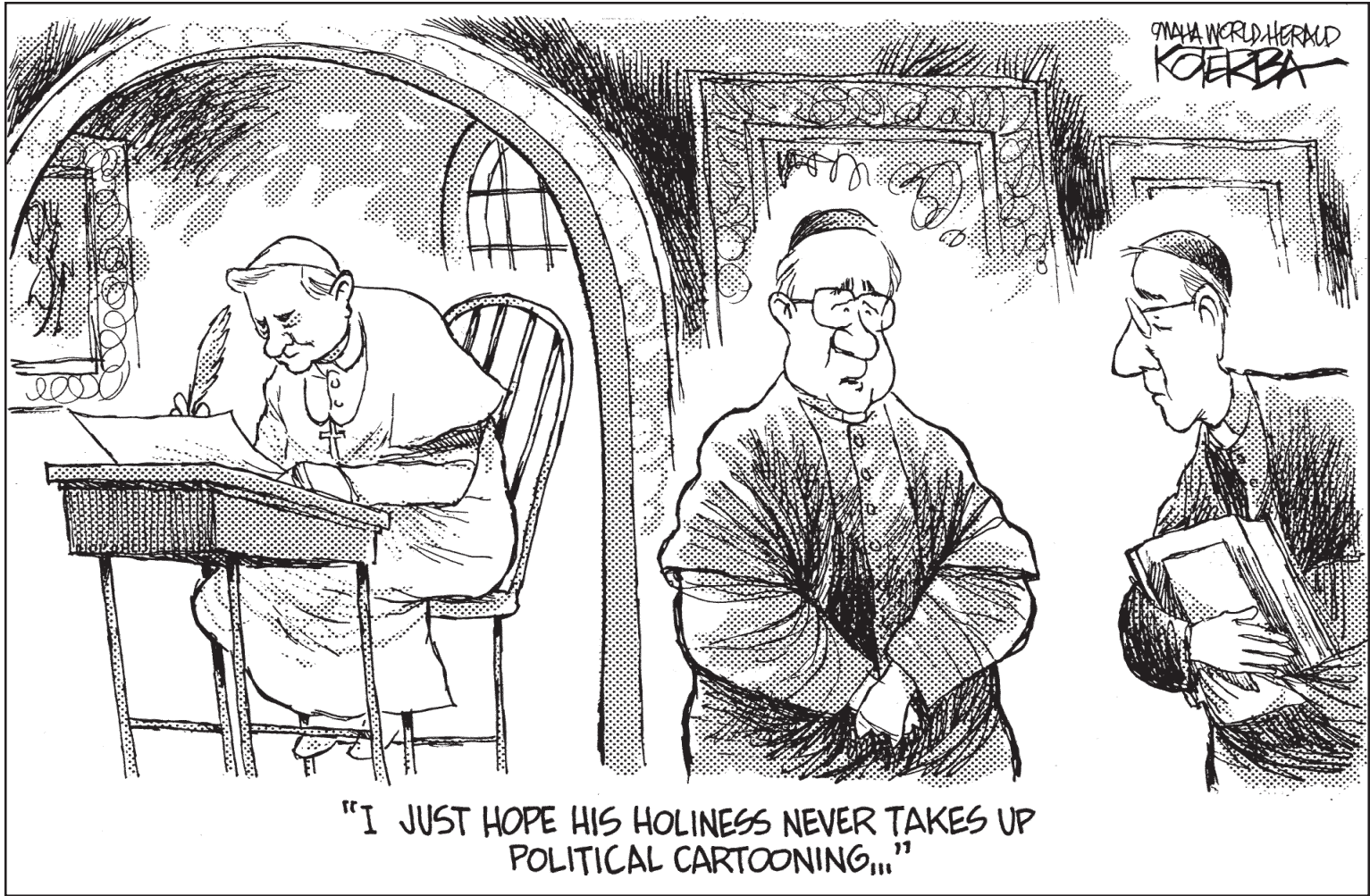
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Games are kid's play



Patty Decker

• Deep Thoughts

Many years ago, some friends pointed out an article from the Associated Press about 16 starters on a football team in Illinois arrested at a party where underage drinking was going on.

The reason the article was brought to my attention was because of the consequences inflicted on those players and the support of that community for the coaches and administration in making a tough decision.

The incident happened more than four years ago, but the message is as appropriate today as it was then.

The headline read: *Drinking's no game: Starting team gets suspended to sidelines*

The following is the story:

ALTON, Ill (AP) — This was going to be the year the Marquette Explorers went all the way. As coach Mike Slaughter put it, "it was the kind of team coaches get once in a lifetime."

But two weeks ago, as the football team prepared for the playoffs, 16 starters were arrested at a party at the house of a classmate and charged with underage drinking.

Maybe even worse for a teenage football player, the penalty for drinking at Marquette is suspension from football, with no exceptions for playoff games.

So on Saturday, each of the suspended players from the best football team ever to come out of the small Catholic school stood on the sidelines, cheering as the second string took the field and went down in a 63-0 loss.

The 1,300 people who watched the game, twice the size of regular season crowds, gave the Marquette players a standing ovation at the end of the rout. The vanquished raised their helmets in salute usually reserved for victories.

The parents and fans who packed the stadium seemed to agree that a hard lesson was learned, and applauded school officials who insisted on teach-

ing it — throwing away Marquette's first real chance at a championship in the process.

"We were so proud of the second- and third-string players who gave it everything they had," said Anna Haine, whose son was one of the only four regular starters to play that day. "In the end, what they got was far more important than just another win."

Marquette has never been a sports powerhouse. The best the football team had done before this year was win a second-place state trophy in 1982. The school is among the smallest in its conference, with just 360 students.

But this year, a cluster of unusually talented seniors led the Explorers to a 10-0 record. Two starters are contenders for Division I college football, Slaughter said.

"We allowed ourselves the dream this was going to be the year we'd go all the way," Slaughter said.

After reading this article again, I was so impressed with the courage of conviction school officials showed in handling this situation. Underage drinking is first and foremost illegal.

I have always been a strong advocate students in sports or other extracurricular activities must be held to higher standards. In the Illinois incident, the school made the right decision.

It was also heartwarming to see parents and oth-

ers who turned out for the game and applauded the players even when they lost. This wasn't a fairy tale or a "wouldn't it be nice" idealistic view — this dealt with real high school players, a coach and fans.

As a parent and someone who cares about young people, I am also not naive enough to believe teenagers won't experiment with alcohol and other drugs. I do believe, though, as adults we need to limit those opportunities.

For example, if a young person is contemplating going to a party where they know drinking is going on, they also know they are gambling on not getting caught for fear of losing playing time — they might just not go.

Of course, the idea being if they want to play "Russian Roulette," they also know they are taking a risk. The hope is realizing there are choices, the student will seriously consider doing the right thing.

Drinking and other drugs are serious problems among young people in Kansas. Studies continue to document the problem of drinking.

Please help our young people by limiting their opportunities, whether it's through a school policy, at home or in law enforcement. The sad part is sometimes once a young person makes the decision to drink or use other drugs, they could be making a decision they can't get out of.

In the case of the Illinois players, the consequence was sitting out a game and maybe that disciplinary action ended up saving their life from being involved in a collision, alcoholic poisoning or worse.

As our young athletes compete in Oakley tonight or, for that matter, athletes in all sports — let's show our support for the love of the game and them.

Decker is editor of the Free Press.

Gone batty

By Steve Haynes

I thought the seats were pretty good — just 10 rows up from the third-base dugout — until I saw the bat spiraling toward us.

We've always done the conventional thing when we wanted baseball tickets, buying them from the team, scrounging them from charity auctions and cadging them from the bank.

The ones the team sells over the phone, we've found, often aren't the best. Season ticket holders have a special line they can call to buy extra seats, and they get first crack at the best of what's left.

We kept talking about a more daring plan — the scalpers who line the streets around any major ballpark.

The streetside vendors buy and sell, scoring extra seats from people headed to the game and selling them (with a markup, of course) to those who need them. It's a vital service, but most teams keep them off the stadium property and away from their boxoffice — for some reason.

The first time we tried this was in Milwaukee this spring, where we decided on the spur of the moment to go to a Brewers game. We were there and we had some spare time and the Braves were in town. County Stadium is one of those out-of-downtown parks where the team controls all the parking and streets for a mile around, but there in the middle of the lots was one lone scalper astride a bike. I figured that was so he could scoot if the cops spotted him.

"You want the good seats?" he asked. (They always say that, by the way.)

We looked — one row behind the visitor's dugout. We bought — \$5 off the printed price.

We enjoyed — you could hear Bobby Cox grunt every time the Braves did something wrong.

So when we decided to go to Denver for one more game, even though we really didn't have time, we had to scrape up some tickets. The bank's were gone, so the scalpers were our choice.

The first guy was buying, not selling. The next pair, a couple of homies in baggy pants and backward caps, had pavilion seats — baseball doublespeak for outfield bleachers.

The next guy turned out to be a lawyer whose firm has a dozen seats. He was unloading his surplus.

Bingo.

So there we were, 10 rows behind the visitors' dugout. A bonus, the employees thought we must be clients, so they were extra nice to us.

Behind us were Jenna and her mother, friends of someone in the firm, and a couple with their 3-month-old baby.

Jenna, 5, blonde, cute and talkative as could be, was at her first baseball game. So, I guess, was the baby.

You might say things started off with a bang in the first when Austin Kearns, the Washington center fielder, struck out swinging. He took such a big cut that his bat just kept on going. And going. Right toward us, spiraling ever higher into the stands..

I was about to cut and run when it veered to the right and landed in the aisle six seats down. The guy in the row behind us grabbed it. An usher rushed up to check him out.

Next inning, the usher came back to get the bat, explaining that Mr. Kearns would really,

really like his game bat back, but he'd be glad to trade a practice bat. An inning later he followed through.

After a foul ball, he came back and tried to get the baby's parents to move somewhere safer. When they turned him down, he sat in front of them and guarded the tike the rest of the night.

The Rocks followed their modus operandi for the week, surging ahead in the first couple of innings, letting Washington tie the game at 6 in the sixth, then winning in the eighth and ninth. Three home runs, a triple, a couple of doubles — there was plenty of action.

Late in the game, I glanced at the scoreboard and thought, "That looks a lot like Jenna and her mom."

Hey, it was Jenna and her mom. I pointed, they looked and my sleeve got on the scoreboard. So much for instant fame.

"Now," her mom asked, "aren't you glad we didn't go to a movie?"

"Well," Jenna replied, all mock serious, "it would have been a *whole* lot safer."

The guy with the bat was complaining about the "piece of *@#*\$" bat Kearns had sent him. I was about to tell him to cool it. He was, I thought, the only fan going home with a major league bat that night.

How wrong I was. How right Jenna was.

In the ninth, with the Nats trailing 9-6, the center fielder came out swinging. With men at second and third, he fanned — sending that same bat back into the crowd.

I don't think he got it back that time.

Steve Haynes is owner of Nor'West Newspapers including the Colby Free Press

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