

High School Wrestler Penalized for Prayer

Alliance Defending Freedom has sent a letter to the North Carolina High School Athletic Association explaining why a wrestling official's penalty against a high school wrestler who prayed for two seconds at the beginning of a match is unconstitutional. The letter asks the association to take steps to ensure that such constitutionally protected expressions of faith will be respected.

"Penalizing two seconds of prayer while allowing two seconds of waving at Mom or shaking hands can mean only one thing: Religious expression has been penalized, and that's not constitutional," said Senior Counsel David Cortman. "All sorts of activity are routinely allowed at athletic events, but when something is religious, suddenly it's a problem for the NCHSAA."

"The explanation that this student was penalized for delaying the match and not because he prayed doesn't make sense," said Senior Legal Counsel Jeremy Tedesco. "Other wrestlers take two seconds to wave or shake hands, and those things are never penalized. This appears to be another example of the lack of tolerance for expressions of religious faith."

A referee associated with the NCHSAA gave Wake Forest-Rolesville High School wrestler Nicholas Fant a warning for allegedly stalling a match when he jogged to the center of the mat and dropped to one knee for two seconds of prayer before the match began. Fant, a junior wrestler in the 220-pound weight class, arose even before the referee finished relaying the call. The warning later contributed to Fant losing a point.

The Alliance Defending Freedom letter explains: “Fant’s kneeling for a two-second prayer before the commencement of his match was obviously not some sort of delay tactic, but a genuine expression of religious devotion that has been commonly practiced by athletes for decades and which Fant engaged in all season without prior incident.

“Indeed, if Fant had stopped for a short handshake with the referee, expression of good luck to his opponent, quick wave to his parents, or even knelt to tie his shoe, it is inconceivable that the NCHSAA referee would have issued a ‘stalling’ warning. The only plausible reason the NCHSAA referee issued such a warning here is because Fant’s action was religious ... in nature.”