

THE ROLE OF WINNING IN YOUTH SPORTS

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Part of your coaches' education program should involve a direct discussion of the importance of winning to a successful program. This important topic traditionally has been filled with clichés. At one extreme is the belief that winning is unimportant in youth sports; at the other extreme is the belief that winning is the only thing. A healthy perspective is probably somewhere between these two beliefs. The importance of winning has been considered by virtually every adult involved in youth sports. Unfortunately, glib clichés may interfere with a thoughtful consideration of the problem. Clearly, there can be too much emphasis on winning; however, those who advocate the position that winning is not important often miss the point that without an attempt to win the contest, the activity is no longer sport. The essence of sport is striving to win; without that attempt, the activity is of a different nature. For example, if two athletes of dramatically different skill levels are playing tennis, often the superior athlete will begin to teach the less skilled athlete. While admirable, teaching is not sport. Two individuals on a golf course who are more interested in being together as friends change the situation from competitive sport to a social interaction. Coaches should realize that while winning is an essential part of sport, youth sports has many other, complementary goals. A key point is to acknowledge that while winning is an important part of sport; it must be kept in perspective with the other valuable aspects of youth sports such as social development, fun, fitness, etc.

Below are a few points which might be considered in a discussion of the importance of winning in youth sports.

a. Winning builds confidence. The old cliché that "Show me a loser and I'll show you a loser" is often cited here. Winning does build confidence especially when that winning represents a true accomplishment; (i.e., I've beaten a worthy opponent). However, winning against other teams or individuals of much lower skill levels normally does little to bolster self-confidence.

b. Winning gains one access to rewards and special privileges. Clearly winners and highly skilled athletes often get better fields, more recognition, greater prestige, more fans, more rewards, trophies and ribbons, and perhaps even local TV and media coverage. Denial of this phenomenon does little to keep winning in a healthy perspective. However, in youth sports programs the adult leadership must continually be watchful that the younger, less skilled, and less experienced athletes are not denied fair access to the opportunity to learn and participate as a result of this differential focus on winners.

c. Winning increases in importance as kids get older. Won-Loss records prior to the age of puberty have little effect on the respect and regard that kids have for their youth sport coaches. Prior to the age of 12 years, research clearly shows that 75% of the youngsters would prefer to play for a losing team than sit on the bench of a winning team. However, during the teenage years, won-loss accomplishments do, in fact, influence the respect which a young athlete has for his or her coach. Coaches should realize that athletes of different ages react different to winning and losing. Such facts emphasize the importance that coaches of younger athletes should not merely mimic the behavior of successful coaches of older youngsters.

d. Winning builds esprit de corps, cohesion and team spirit. The research has not yet established if winning fosters team spirit or if team spirit fosters winning. Intra-squad competition often produces better performance with lowered levels of team spirit. That is, "winning" a spot on the starting line-up at the expense of a teammate may create more turmoil within the team if fairness and equal opportunity are not perceived by the majority of team members.

e. Winning increases motivation. While this statement may seem self-evident, research findings point out situations where winning can be quite de-motivating. For example, when the probability of success (i.e., winning) is very high the contest often lacks the excitement and vigor of a more closely contested match. A perceived probability of success of approximately 0.50 has been shown to produce higher levels of sustained excitement and motivation than higher or lower probabilities of success.

f. Winning becomes a more appropriate goal if the definitions of winning are broadened. For example, winning can be defined as self-improvement and/or as goal attainment. Improving on one's previous performance or attaining previously set goals can be interpreted as success in a sports setting where, by definition, there are only a few winners (i.e., first places). If sport is to be viewed as beneficial for our children, it must benefit the majority of participants in a meaningful way rather than be limited to the elite few who ultimately win the actual contest.

g. Winners are those who handle failure better. There is often the belief that all those who are successful were successful throughout their careers. Actually, champions are often those who coped with their difficulties, set-backs, or losses better than their opponents. A .300 hitter in baseball is out 7/10 times at bat. The difference between a good .300 hitter and a mediocre .250 hitter is 1 more hit in every twenty times at bat.

h. Winning does not ensure the quality of the performance. One can perform well and still finish second; conversely one can perform poorly yet still win because the opponent also failed to perform well. Mastery programs where the athletes are asked to meet a minimum level of performance often produce higher levels of performance than do competitive programs.

i. Winning in youth sports is relative to whom you play. That is, winning often depends more upon who does the scheduling than the performance level of the athletes. If a team is scheduled only against inferior opponents, the team's won-loss record will be good but the accomplishment is clearly devalued. Relative skill levels are a crucial factor in sport at all levels.

j. A crucial ingredient in youth sports is HOW YOU WIN as opposed to whether you win. Winning within the boundaries of the rules and ethics of sportsmanship can place a great premium on winning without distorting the basic sporting values which many would like to see our children learn. In fact, a strong argument can be made for the fact that true sportsmanship cannot exist unless there is an honest desire to win. Playing fairly when one has no concern about the outcome of the game is not the same level of ethics as playing fairly when one wants strongly to win.

k. Winning in youth sports programs is most influenced by the athlete's state of physiological maturity. Physical maturity is more important than coaching, individual effort, equipment or any other normally valued aspect of sport. "Clean-up batters" in the Little League World Championships (a contest for 12 year olds and under) have consistently found to be post-pubescent in terms of physical maturity. Coaches often are given credit for an outstanding season when, in fact, they simply have had the more physically gifted or physically mature young athletes.

l. Winning is evidenced in achievement. However, successful youth sports coaches reinforce participation effort and achievement, in that order. As a young athlete's age, maturity and experience develop, successful coaches shift their emphasis from simply encouraging participation to praising putting forth one's best effort. As age, maturity and experience factor continue to develop, the coach's emphasis shifts again toward praising mastering skills, performing well and winning contests.

These topics about the importance of winning are not meant to be all inclusive. Each of the topics is touched on only briefly. Hopefully, these concepts stimulate discussions of the importance of winning in youth sports that avoid clichés and stereotypes. Clichés such as, "It's all for the kids" while well-meaning, fail to address many of the actual issues in youth sports and, thus, prevent us from designing effective programs. Effective youth sports programs establish the young athletes' needs as priority without ignoring the many motivations of parents, coaches, and officials who make these programs work.