

Athletes First, Winning Second

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As a form of competition, sport involves a contest between opposing individuals or teams. An athletic event is a struggle for supremacy in which every coach and athlete seeks to emerge victorious. The common notion in sports thus equates success with winning – scoring more points, runs or goals than the opponent. However, in a youth or developmental model of sport (Smoll & Smith, 1999), the measure of success goes beyond records and standings. Success is a personal thing and is related to one's own standards and abilities.

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Success is peace of mind, which is a direct result of self-satisfaction in knowing you did your best to become the best you are capable of becoming.

– John Wooden, former UCLA basketball coach

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With respect to the educational benefits of sport, youngsters can learn valuable lessons from both winning and losing. But for this to occur, winning must be placed in a healthy perspective. We have therefore developed a four-part philosophy of winning (Smith & Smoll, 2002a; Smoll & Smith, 1981).

The purpose of this article is to present an overview of the philosophy and to consider ways of conveying it to athletes. Hopefully, the article will serve as a guide for developing your views and orientation toward winning. Moreover, by successfully implementing this philosophy in your role as coach or teacher, you will be able to maximize young athletes' enjoyment of sports and their chances of deriving the positive outcomes of participation.

PART 1: Winning isn't everything, nor is it the only thing.

Young athletes can't possibly learn from winning and losing if they think the only objective is to beat their opponents. On the other hand, it would be naive and unrealistic to believe that winning is not an important part of youth sports. Winning is an important goal, but it is not the most important objective.

Most programs seek to develop desirable psychological and social characteristics as well as physical skills. However, as we all know, some coaches get caught up in a "winning is everything" orientation and place an overemphasis on winning. When this occurs, they may temporarily lose sight of other important objectives and values of their program. This does not mean that coaches should not try to build winning teams, but sometimes winning becomes more important for the coach than it is for the athlete.

Our research has shown that coaches for whom athletes enjoyed playing most, and who were most successful in promoting youngsters' self-esteem, actually had won-lost records that were about the same as coaches who were less liked and less effective in fostering feelings of self-worth (see Smoll & Smith, 2002).

Another finding was that athletes on winning teams believed that their parents liked the coach more and that the coach liked them more than did athletes on losing teams. This is an interesting commentary on children's perceptions of adult values. Winning made little difference to the youngsters, but they knew that it was important to the adults in their lives.

Given that sport is heavily achievement-oriented, seeking victory is encouraged. However, to create the most valuable experience for athletes, coaches should help them understand that there is more to get out of sports than just a won-lost record. This can be done by reducing the ultimate importance of winning relative to other prized participation motives (e.g., skill development and affiliation with teammates).

Most notably, in recognition of the inverse relation between enjoyment and competitive anxiety, fun should be highlighted as the paramount objective (Scanlan & Lewthwaite, 1984; Scanlan & Passer, 1978, 1979). If young people leave your program having enjoyed relating to you and to their teammates, feeling better about themselves, having improved their skills and looking forward to future sport participation, you have accomplished something far more important than a winning record or a league championship.

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The bottom line in youth sports should not be based on pressure to win. Instead, it should be on the enjoyment of competing and the opportunity to develop positive attitudes toward other people.

– Lute Olson, University of Arizona basketball coach

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PART 2: Failure is not the same thing as losing.

Athletes should not view losing as a sign of failure or as a threat to their personal value. They should be taught that losing a game is not a reflection of their own self-worth. In other words, when individuals or teams lose a contest, it does not mean that their worth is less than it would have been had they won.

PART 3: Success is not equivalent to winning.

Neither success nor failure need depends on the outcome of a contest or the numbers in a won-lost record. Winning and losing apply to the outcome of a contest, whereas success and failure do not. How then can we define success in sports?

PART 4: Athletes should be taught that success is found in striving for victory.

The important idea is that success is related to commitment and effort. Athletes have complete control over the amount of effort they give, but they have only limited control of the outcome that is achieved. If you can impress on your athletes that they are never “losers” if they commit themselves to doing their best and give maximum effort, you are giving them a priceless gift that will assist them in many of life’s tasks.

Comments by two well-known college coaches indicate that their philosophy of winning agrees with the orientation presented above.

Penn State football coach Joe Paterno stated, “We can’t let people get hold of our kids and make them think they’ve got to win. The winning is great. You strive for it. You try to do it. You compete to win. But if you lose, you lose. I’ve never seen a football game where there wasn’t enough glory for everybody – winners and losers.”

Similarly, former UCLA basketball coach John Wooden once told a group of coaches: “You cannot find a player who ever played for me at UCLA that can tell you he ever heard me mention ‘winning’ a basketball game. Yet the last thing I told my athletes, just prior to tip-off, before we would go on the floor was, ‘When the game is over, I want your head up – and I know of only one way for your head to be up – and that’s for you to know that you did your best. This means to do the best you can do. That’s the best; no one can do more. You made that effort.’”

With a developmentally oriented philosophy of winning, coaches are urged to focus on athletes’ effort and enjoyment rather than on success as measured by statistics or scoreboards. In other words, you are encouraged to emphasize “doing your best,” “getting better” and “having fun” as opposed to a “win at all costs” orientation.

Although formulated prior to the emergence of achievement goal theory (Ames, 1992; Dweck, 1999; Nicholls, 1989), this approach clearly is consistent with a task or mastery orientation (see McArdle & Duda, 2002). Moreover, focusing on effort rather than outcome is consistent with Dweck’s (1975) highly successful attributional retraining program with low-achieving children. Children who received Dweck’s intervention showed improved performance (in a math problem-solving task) and were better able to cope with failure. Within the realm of sport, one might expect this approach to lessen the effects of failure, thereby reducing stress for athletes.

Behavioral guide for coaches

A number of research-derived guidelines for enhancing relationship skills are presented in our book *Way to Go, Coach!* (Smith & Smoll, 2002a). They constitute the core of our scientifically-validated coaching education program, which is known as Coach Effectiveness Training (see Smith & Smoll, 2002b; Smoll & Smith, 2001).

Two of the guidelines have direct relevance to developing a healthy philosophy of winning. First, reinforce effort as much as results. It’s easy to recognize and praise an athlete who just made a great play, but coaches usually are less likely to reward a player who tried hard but did not make the play. Perhaps the second athlete deserves (and needs) positive feedback even more.

Let your athletes know that you appreciate and value their efforts. Make sure their efforts are not taken for granted. As we stated earlier, athletes have complete control over how much effort they make; but they have only limited control over the outcome of their efforts. By looking for and praising athletes’ efforts, you can encourage them to continue or increase their output.

A second coaching guideline is pertinent to our philosophy of winning: Encourage effort, don’t demand results. Most young athletes already are motivated to develop their skills and play well. By appropriate use of encouragement, a coach can help increase their natural enthusiasm. If, however, youngsters are encouraged to strive for unrealistic standards of achievement, they may feel like failures when they don’t reach the goal. Therefore, it is important to base encouragement on reasonable expectations. Again, a coach encouraging effort rather than outcome can help avoid problems.

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The only successful youth sports program is the one with the coach who will accept losing along with winning, last place in the league along with first place, and still be able to congratulate his team for their efforts.

– Roger Staubach, former Dallas Cowboys quarterback

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Reducing fear of failure

Fear of failure can be an athlete's worst enemy. High levels of competition anxiety not only reduce performance, but also make the athletic situation threatening and unpleasant rather than enjoyable. In fact, many young athletes drop out of sports because of the stress created by their fear of failure (see Smith, Smoll, & Passer, 2002).

How does fear of failure develop? Usually, it arises because the young athlete has been punished for failing to achieve a desired outcome. Such punishment may come from coaches, parents or peers, or it may be self-administered by athletes themselves when they fail to measure up to their own performance standards.

Because the punishment and resulting decrease in self-esteem are so distasteful, athletes may come to fear and dread the possibility of failing. They dread making a mistake or losing a contest. Their fear, by disrupting performance, increases the likelihood that they will perform poorly. It is easy to understand why some athletes "choke" in pressure situations. Instead of enjoying competition and developing a positive drive for achievement, some athletes are driven by the negative motive of avoiding failure.

How can coaches help to prevent development of fear of failure in their athletes? We believe that John Wooden had the answer when he emphasized to his UCLA teams that success lies in doing one's best, of giving maximum effort regardless of the final score. If coaches only demand that athletes give their best, and if they reward their efforts rather than focusing only on outcome, athletes can learn to set similar standards for themselves. As far as winning is concerned, if athletes are well trained, give maximum effort and are free of performance-disrupting fears of failing, winning will take care of itself within the limits of their ability.

A final thought

Tremendous concern has been shown for the amount of emphasis placed on winning in youth sports. Yet to be for or against competition is not the issue. Sport competition is neither universally good nor bad for kids. The important thing is how the competition is organized and conducted. The philosophy of the American Sport Education Program, "Athletes first, winning second," reflects a proper perspective on winning (Hanlon, 1994). In other words, the most important coaching product is not a won-lost record. It is the quality of the experience provided for the athletes.