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Winning! How Important Is It in Youth Sports?

By Michael A. Clark

Institute for the Study of Youth Sports, Michigan State University

The answer to this question depends upon who is responding. For the young athletes themselves, the answer evidently is, "Not very." When a national sample of youth, aged 10 to 18 years, were asked why they participated in sports, "to win" was not among the top ten reasons for girls and was only seventh on the list for boys. Moreover, when these same young people were asked what they would change about sports, "less emphasis on winning" made the top ten on the list for both genders. Attitudes about the importance of winning change with the athletes' ages. Younger athletes are more interested in the "fairness" of their games, while older athletes become more concerned about winning. But even then, many young athletes say that they would rather play on a losing team than "sit the bench" on a winning team.

Administrators and officials often emphasize participation over competition in the rules for contests and the guidelines they prepare for coaches. Especially for younger players, rules often require equal amounts of playing time for all, while discouraging keeping scores or records. The number of programs taking this approach seems to be growing. Such programs proclaim, "Everyone is a winner!" The administrators mean this sincerely, but they often seem to have little idea of exactly how to turn the slogan into reality.

However, if coaches and parents were asked how important winning is to their child's success in sports, many of them clearly would respond, "VERY!" Even when program directors refuse to keep game scores or won-lost records, the other adults involved (the coaches and parents) know exactly what the results are. For them, winning in youth games is important, and so quickly it develops that "Winning isn't everything, it's the only thing," as legendary football coach Vince Lombardi is supposed to have observed. Adults who believe that an accent on winning is essential to success make much of the best record or leading scorer; they hand out championship trophies and name most valuable players.

Coaches, parents and spectators who focus on winning in these terms are viewing youth sports as they likely would view adult endeavors. This thinking often results in mistaking the winning or losing of contests with the success or failure of the contestants or even with whether the athletes are good or bad people. Concentrating solely on the final score as the important outcome of games causes people to develop a very narrow definition of winning. The consequences of this are potentially damaging to young athletes.

The way out of this dangerously narrow view of winning in youth sports may lie in what Coach Lombardi actually said: "Winning isn't everything, but striving to win is." Vern Seefeldt, director of the Youth Sports Institute, reinforced this point when he observed, "Striving to win is the essence of sports." By placing the emphasis on the athletes and their effort, winning is redefined in such a way that it comes within the reach of all.

But how is effort defined and measured?

In part, the answer lies in observing the athletes at play. It is relatively easy to see whether young athletes are taking the competition seriously or are simply "playing the game." The former requires a sincere effort, made by athletes who know the skills and strategies of the sport and who execute them as ably as possible within the spirit of the rules; the latter may occur at any level of play and is apparent by in the athletes' lack of enthusiasm and effort.

Each performance must be evaluated within the context of the sport. Scoring points, lowering times or improving distances are relevant, because they imply something about the effort made. Equally important are knowing what defense the opponents are using, being able to "stick" a dismount or understanding when to ice the puck. Making a kick turn, using a scissors takedown or shooting a left-handed lay-up (and executing these moves correctly while competing) also are expressions of effort and, therefore, success. In short, making an effort to be competitive involves a complex set of tasks, which differ from sport to sport.

Moreover, it is obvious when athletes are failing to put forth the proper effort to make each minute of a contest competitive. "Games" often are referred to as "contests," and at some time, every coach, player or spectator has been involved in games that have ceased to be contests. When this happens, everyone "loses." The clues are many and varied: the players appear to be "going through the motions", coaches cease to worry about strategies, officials make strange decisions or "no-calls", spectators lose interest and leave or begin socializing. But most importantly, as Seefeldt observed, "playing a game as if you don't care (with a lethargic effort) takes all the fun out of sports." When the games are no longer contests, playing them ceases to be fun. The players mock "winning" such games, for they sense how hollow victory is in such situations.

The challenge is for the adults associated with youth sports to redefine winning in terms of effort and to restructure play to promote effort. Some potential changes lie in:

Creating balanced competitions so that outcomes are in doubt.

Helping players set achievable, individual goals.

Teaching athletes to measure their success in terms of attaining such goals.

Celebrating with and rewarding players who reach their goals.

The first point focuses on the motivation of young athletes. Generally, young athletes want competitions to be fair and for the outcome to be in question. If these conditions are met, they will make a maximum effort. Otherwise, they are likely to spend their time complaining about how unbalanced the teams are or how unfair the game is. It is adults who "stack" teams and want to win by lopsided scores; young athletes tell researchers that fairness is the essence of the games they play.

Meaningful and attainable goals are essential to success in any activity, but never more so than in youth sports. Children should have clearly defined goals to work for and learn, and they deserve to be intimately involved in establishing these goals.

Individual goals are much more effective than group or team goals. They allow each athlete to know exactly what needs to be accomplished.

With individual goals clearly defined, athletes should expect to have their efforts measured against advancement towards these goals. Reaching these goals can only be accomplished through learning and executing the essentials of the sport. Thus, the goals become the means of measuring effort; did the athletes make the kind of effort in each practice and competition that moved them closer to achieving their stated goals, or was the effort inconsistent, weak or lackluster? If a player's effort was aimed at achieving the goals, then the performance was a success, no matter what the score of the competition.

Finally, when the previously determined goals are reached, the athlete's achievement should be recognized and honored. In addition to motivating the athlete, this acknowledges the importance of striving to meet the goals, to be competitive, to make the effort.

Making the effort is within the reach of any athlete and is appropriate for all athletes. Consequently, it constitutes a definition of winning that can be applied to all situations. Adults who use it will go far toward ensuring that young athletes have positive experiences.

In this context, the proper questions for adults to ask are not "Did you win?" or "How many points did you score?" Rather coaches and parents should want to know "Did you give your best effort?" or "Did you do something better than you previously could?" Young athletes often can answer "Yes" to these questions, even when the scoreboard stands against them.

This redefinition of winning makes it possible to accommodate a variety of views of youth sports. The most vocal critics of competition in youth sports are the able to see the benefits of making it possible for all athletes to become winners. The staunchest advocates of highly competitive sports generally will recognize the value of setting goals and weighing performance in terms of effort toward reaching the goals.

The result of defining "winning" in terms of effort rather than outcome is to make youth sports more humane, meaningful, satisfying and enjoyable. In this way, the correct answer to the question "How important is winning?" becomes "VERY!" Striving to win and giving one's best effort are objectives that every coach, player, parent or adult can, and should, support.