

Pennsylvania

Commentary

True meaning of youth sports: Winning, losing — and learning

Children have to realize the difference between wanting and needing to win.

By Ed Hastings

A friend related the following story to me: His 6-year-old son, Tommy, was dribbling up the court in a basketball game. As Tommy crossed midcourt, the boy guarding him stopped to tie his sneaker. Tommy instinctively stopped and kept dribbling the ball as his opponent tended to his shoelaces. Then the parents in the stands began yelling at Tommy to move the ball forward and not worry about his opponent's equipment problems. "Go on, Tommy, don't wait for him. Go ahead and score a basket," they screamed.

In the car on the way home, with tears streaming down his face, Tommy asked his father why those adults were yelling at him.

The story illustrates what can happen on playing fields, gym floors and hockey rinks: In our desire to win, we sometimes forget what is most important.

I'm not saying the adults here are bad people, only that their winning-is-everything philosophy caused them to lose focus on the good that sports can create. I'd like to focus on the casualties of this way of thinking: perspective, values and fun.

Consider the origins of the word perspective. It means to see through, to see clearly. The need to win can cloud our vision and prevent perspective.

Psychologist Karen Horney distinguishes between needing and wanting. According to Horney, needing connotes a certain obsessiveness concerning one's desired object, whereas wanting suggests less emotional investment. For example, one can need to win so bad that one might be willing to compromise values

to that end. Wanting to win, however, does not usually move one to sacrifice integrity.

The obsessiveness of needing to win can blur our vision as to what is most important — as it did with the adults watching Tommy's game.

Likewise, our values can be compromised too easily when our primary motive is being number one. The recent prevalence of scandal in major college basketball caused the National Collegiate Athletic Association to convene a meeting of the major coaches in Division I. Attendance was enforced by the threat of revoking the Final Four tickets of any coach who failed to attend.

Some who attended have told me that NCAA officials told the assembled coaches about the importance of values and integrity. They were also reminded — as perhaps the adults at Tommy's game should have been — that the need to win can bring

out the worst in people and cause them to compromise their standards.

The element of fun is becoming endangered when this emphasis on winning rears its head in youth sports. The need to win leads to playing only the most talented kids at key times and does not foster skill development or self-confidence. But when youths are asked why they enjoy sports, winning is not among the top answers. Rather, it is the fun of spending time with their friends, learning the game, and getting out and playing. I think Tommy's behavior demonstrates that.

The irony of this need-to-win mentality is that losing can teach us more about life than winning. Whereas a win can bring a feeling of satisfaction or even complacency about one's performance, a loss can prompt reevaluation



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and assessment.

Reflecting on lessons learned his senior year while playing basketball at the Citadel, author Pat Conroy considers what losing taught him in *My Losing Season*:

"Winning is wonderful in every aspect, but ... loss is a fiercer, more uncompromising teacher — Though I learned some things from the games we won that year, I learned much, much more from loss."

And we can learn by paying attention to young people like Tommy, who, despite the screams of his elders, demonstrated wisdom way beyond his years.

I'm sure Tommy wanted to win, but that would stand in the way of his respecting his opponent or trying to have a good time. Though he could make that judgment at age 6, the howlers in the stands — people who were a generation older — couldn't grasp the concept.

Until they and others understand the difference between wanting and needing to win, they'll compromise the purpose of youth sports, which is to have fun.

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