

SOME CALL IT WINNING -- I CALL IT LOSING!

When I competed in sports, winning was important. But my parents also stressed that it's not only whether you win or lose that counts, but how you play the game. I still remember that I once threw my tennis racquet. Only once -- because when I did it was taken away from me for a month!

Sports are so different today. Everything seems to be about winning. At all costs and regardless of how the game is played.

Following are a few incidents that caused me to write this article:

A young hockey player recently asked me to watch one of his playoff games. I said "sure, I could come to the game that night." He was delighted. But then he suggested I come to the next game instead. When I asked why, he told me his coach had told the team to intentionally *lose* that night's game in order to play against a weaker team the following day. In all my years of involvement in hockey it never occurred to me that coaches would tell youngsters to *intentionally blow* a game. When I asked the boy how he felt about this he said he felt terrible but that he couldn't do anything about it. I did go to the game that night and I watched the team "go through the motions." They obeyed their coach. They lost. They went on to win the next game (against the weaker team) and to win the entire tournament. What a win. What a lesson. In my eyes every player on that team lost -- big time!

In a state high school tournament several players were mouthing off at the officials. One player became particularly offensive and was given a game misconduct. The officials had to physically escort this player off the ice and into the locker room. He resisted and cursed all the way. The player was told to stay in the locker room for the remainder of the game but of course he didn't. He came out cursing some more, using some of the most vile words and exhibiting some of the ugliest behavior I've ever experienced. He cursed and banged his fists on the glass for the rest of the game. Why didn't his coach intervene? Why wasn't the entire team held responsible? Even given another penalty; one that would have impacted the team and made a powerful statement about unacceptable behavior?

In figure skating it is quietly acknowledged (though rarely discussed) that parents and coaches encourage their budding stars to "be aggressive" out there; that if other skaters get in their way to "pay them back." The Tonya Harding - Nancy Kerrigan attack was extreme, but incidents of intimidation and even of intentionally induced injuries in the "genteel" world of figure skating are more common than we know.

Coaches are teachers and have a huge responsibility. They can imbue (or not imbue) values that go far beyond sport itself. They can inspire children to think, create, experiment, be artistic, or instead teach them instead to fear authority, to obey without question and to perform mechanically. They can demand that their athletes exhibit honesty, fair play, courtesy, consideration, sportsmanship and etiquette as being integral to winning, or they can stress that they should do "whatever it takes" to win.

What are the lessons of sport and life that parents want their young athletes to come away with?

Think about the athletes we admire so much -- the names Wayne Gretzky, Mario Lemieux, Michael Jordan, Tiger Woods, Cammi Granato, Michelle Kwan, come to mind. What distinguishes these great athletes from so many others? Think of it! Throughout good times and bad they have always played their game with class.

I believe it is time to come down hard on negative behavior and poor sportsmanship. Young athletes must be taught that "how they play the game" counts. Then, regardless of the outcome of the game, they will be true winners.

Skate Great Hockey

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