

# YOUTH SPORTS OBJECTIVES AND VALUES

## KIDS ARE NOT PROS!

An important issue is the difference between youth and professional models of sport. The major goals of professional sports are directly linked to their status in the entertainment industry. The goals of professional sports, simply stated, are to entertain and ultimately to make money. Financial success is of primary importance and depends heavily on a product orientation, namely winning. Is this wrong? Certainly not! As part of the entertainment industry, professional sports have tremendous status in our society.

In the professional sport world, players are commodities to be bought, sold and traded. Their value is based on how much they contribute to winning and profit making. They are the instruments of success on the field and at the box office, and they are dealt with a property or as cogs in a machine. As a tearful Willie Mays said on being traded by the San Francisco Giants late in his career, "All they seem to care about is what you did for them yesterday and what you can do for them tomorrow."

Professional athletes are often glorified by the media to create an image intended to generate interest in the team and to draw paying customers. However many professional athletes feel that little real concern is shown to them as human beings or as contributing members of society. For example, several professional teams have reportedly turned deaf ears to reports of drug abuse by star athletes as long as the athletes continued to perform well.

The professional coach's job is to win. Those who don't, usually join the ranks of the unemployed rather quickly and unceremoniously. No gold watches for years of service, either! A win at all costs philosophy is required for advancement and, indeed, survival. Professional coaches do not receive bonuses for developing character. Their primary function is to help the franchise compete successfully for the entertainment dollar. As emphasized by veteran NBA coach Pat Riley, "Nobody is ever above the business of what this whole league is about, which is money."

The developmental model of sports has a far more different focus. As its name suggests, the goal is to develop the individual. The most important product is not wins or dollars, but rather, the quality of the experience for the child. In this sense, sport participation is an educational process whereby children can learn to cope with realities they will face later in life. Although winning is sought after, it is by no means the primary goal. Profit is measured, not in terms of dollars and cents, but in terms of the skills and personal characteristics that are acquired.

Sometimes these two athletic models get confused. Most of the problems in youth sports occur when uninformed adults erroneously impose a professional

model on what should be a recreational and educational experience for children.

### **WHAT YOUTH SPORTS SHOULD BE ABOUT?**

Coaches, like young athletes, involve themselves in sports for many reasons. Youth sport objectives can range from simply providing a worthwhile leisure-time activity for children to laying the foundation for becoming an Olympic champion or a professional athlete. Of course there are many other goals that may well be more appropriate. Some of them are physical, such as attaining sport skills and increasing health and fitness. Others are psychological, such as developing leadership skills, self-discipline, respect for authority, competitiveness, cooperativeness, sportsmanship, and self-confidence. These are many of the positive attributes that fall under the heading of character.

Youth sports are also an important social activity in which children can make new friends and acquaintances and become part of an ever-expanding social network. Furthermore, sports can serve to bring families closer together. Finally of course, youth sports are (or should be) just plain FUN!

Fun. A term we use a lot. But what is it? Certainly it's easy to tell when people are having fun. They show it in their expression of happiness, satisfaction, and enthusiasm. Being with others, meeting challenges, feeling the drama of uncertain outcomes, becomes more skilled-all of these add to the fun of sports. In the words of an 8-year-old girl "Fun is when I'm doing something that makes me happy just to be doing it, like playing tennis."

Winning also adds to the fun, but we sell sports, short if we insist that winning is the most important ingredient. In fact, several studies reported that when children were asked where they would rather be on a winning team or playing regularly on a losing team- about 90% of the children chose the losing team. The message is clear: The enjoyment of playing is more important to children than the satisfaction of winning.

The importance of having fun is also shown in other scientific studies. A sport psychologist, Dr. Daniel Gould, summarized the results of two surveys conducted in the United States and Canada. The studies indicated that young athletes most often say they participate in organized sports for the following reasons:

- α To have fun.
- α To improve their skills and learn new skills.
- α To be with their friends or make new friends.
- α For thrills and excitement.
- α To succeed or win
- α To become physically fit.

Does your popularity as a coach depend on your won-lost record? No! In one of our studies, we found that teams' won-lost records have nothing to do with how well young athletes liked the coaches they played for or their desire to play for the same coach again. Interestingly, however success of the team was related to how much the children thought their parents liked the coach. The children also felt that the won-lost record influenced how much their coach liked them. It appears that, even at a very young age, children begin to tune in to the adult emphasis on winning, even though they do not yet share it themselves. What children do share is a desire to have fun.

One of the quickest ways to reduce fun is for adults to begin treating kids as if they were varsity or professional athletes. We need to keep in mind that young athletes are not miniature adults. They are children, and they have the right to play as children. Youth sports are, first and foremost, a play activity: and children deserve to enjoy sports in their own way. In essence, it is important that programs remain child-centered and do not become adult-centered. In other words of major league baseball manager Sparky Anderson:

*It's a disgrace what we're doing in the United States and Canada. We're asking kids to compete to win. Why not ask them to compete to have fun? We're trying to build our own egos on little children.*

Whatever your objectives may be it is important that you become aware of them. And you must realize that none of these objectives can be achieved automatically as a result of mere participation in sports. Simply placing a child in a sport situation does not guarantee a positive outcome. The nature and quality of the program, which are directly dependant on your input, are prime factors in determining benefits.

### **IS WINNING THE ONLY THING?**

During his years as coach of the Green Bay packers, Vince Lombardi created a professional football dynasty. His team was the powerhouse of the NFL during the 1960s - a team driven to near perfection by an intensely competitive, perfectionist leader. Lombardi's image was immortalized in the famous statement "winning isn't everything, it's the only thing." But did you know that Lombardi never actually said that? Years after his death, his son revealed that his father had been misquoted. What Lombardi actually said was "Winning isn't everything but striving to win is."

John Wooden was another winner, and so were the UCLA bruins who played for him. During a 12-year period from 1963 through 1975, his teams won the national collegiate basketball championship ten times. Certainly, to be that successful, Wooden and his Bruins had to be single-mindedly focused on winning games. And yet, at least where Wooden was concerned, this was not the case. In fact, just like Lombardi, he placed an emphasis on the process of striving for excellence.

Yes, Lombardi and Wooden were winners. Their won-lost records speak for themselves. But their vision went beyond a preoccupation with winning games. Instead they demanded that their players dedicate themselves to 100% effort.

The common notion in sport equates success with victory- scoring more points, runs, or goals than the opponent. Yet in a youth sport model the measure of a person's or a team's success goes beyond records and standings. Success is a personal thing and is related to one's own standards and abilities.

Wooden's perspective on success may be the most important reason he deserves the title "Wizard of Westwood." He realized that everyone can be a success because success relates to the effort put into realizing one's personal potential.

### **THE REAL MEANING OF WINNING**

In terms of educational benefits of sports, children can learn 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 designed to maximize youth athletes' enjoyment of sport and their chances of achieving the positive outcomes of participation.

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. Does this mean that you should not try to build winning teams? Definitely not! As a form of competition, sport involves a contest between opposing individuals or teams. It would be naïve and unrealistic to believe that winning is not an important goal in sports. But it is not the most important goal.

Children should leave your program having enjoyed relating to you and their teammates feeling better about themselves, having improved their skills, and looking forward to future sport participation. When this happens, something far more valuable has been accomplished than having a winning record or winning a league championship.

2. *Failure is not the same 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 on their own self-worth. In other words, when individuals or teams lose a contest it does not mean that they are worth less than if they had won. In fact, some valuable lessons can be learned from losing. Children can learn to persist in the face of obstacles and to support each other even when they do not achieve victory.
3. *Success is not equivalent to winning.* Thus neither success nor failure need depend on the outcome of a contest or 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?

4. *Athletes should be taught that success is found in striving for victory.* The important idea is that success is related effort! The only thing that athletes have complete control over is the amount of effort they give. They have limited control over the outcome that is achieved. If you can impress on your athletes that they are never “losers” if they give maximum effort, you are giving them a priceless gift that will assist them in many of life’s tasks. A youth soccer coach had the right idea when he told his team “you kids are always winners when you try your best! But sometimes the other team will score more goals.”

When winning is kept in perspective, the child comes first and winning is second. In this case, the most important coaching product is not a win-loss record; it is the quality of the sport experience provided for the athletes.

#### **YOUTH SPORT AND THE BIGGER PICTURE**

I am worried about my son. He seems to have gotten things out of perspective as far as sports are concerned. Although he’s only 13 years old, he is convinced that his future lies in college and professional sports. Nothing else seems to matter.

Earlier this chapter we indicated that athletics can contribute to personal, social, and physical well being of youngsters. Sport is an important area in the lives of many children. And for a small number, youth sports are the first phase of a journey that ends in a career in professional athletics.

To strive for high standards of athletic excellence is commendable. But coaches, parents, athletes alike must realize that the chances of actually becoming a professional are remote. Even if a child appears to be a gifted athlete, the odds are overwhelming. According to Dr. Richard Lapchik, director of the Center for the Study of Sports in Society, the chance of a high school athlete becoming a professional in any sport is 1 in 12,000.

Given the reality of the situation, a career in professional sports or even participation at the college level is an unrealistic goal for the majority of young athletes. It is therefore important to impress on youngsters that sport is but one part of life for a well-rounded person. It is all too easy for young athletes to harbor fantasies of turning pro and to sacrifice other areas of their development in pursuit of that fabled status and its rewards of fame, money and glory. As valuable as athletics can be for development children, social and academic development, spiritual enrichment, and quality of family life should not suffer. Sport can offer both fun and fulfillment, but there is more to life than sports.

Perhaps the best advice we can give is to encourage children to participate in sports if they wish. But at the same time coaches should help athletes to understand that sport participation is not an end in itself, but a means of achieving various goals. You can teach them to enjoy the process of competition for itself, rather than to focus on such end products as victories and trophies. Neither victory nor defeat should be blown out of proportion, and no coach should permit a child to define his or her self-worth purely on the basis of sport performance. By keeping sports in perspective, you can make them a source of personal growth and enrichment.

Taken from: Smith, R, E. & Smoll F, L. 2002. **Way To Go Coach**, Portola Valley CA: Warde Publishers Inc