



Chapter 4

DO WE LEARN MORE FROM WINNING OR LOSING?

“Life is a succession of lessons which must be lived to be understood.” —Ralph Waldo Emerson

When I ask high school and college students whether they learn more from winning or losing, most respond that they learn more from losing. As the discussions evolve, so does the understanding that no athlete experiences one without the other, and that valuable lessons are to be found in both winning and losing.

The Value of Winning

“Rapid motion through space elates one.”

—James Joyce, Irish author

For many competitors, it is the moment of victory that spurs them. During competition, every sense is at a high pitch. When victory is secured, the rushing adrenaline is replaced by feelings of euphoria and utter contentment. One surveyed athlete wrote: “I have not found such joy in any other part of my life.”

For a young athlete, there is value to experiencing “the feeling”—a powerful combination of contentment, pride, and accomplishment upon winning. This wonderfully unique feeling is often the result of, and reward for, considerable effort and hard work. As a parent, your objective is not to allow the allure of winning to become so important that it supersedes doing what is right. One of sports’ most lamentable problems is that many young athletes are allowed, if not encouraged, to let their desire to win run roughshod over honorable competition.

In helping your child build an ethical code that encompasses the development of the many positive values that should go hand-in-hand with sports, you must consistently make clear that winning never overrides fair play.

Let’s look at some requirements for winning, for there are lessons associated with such achievement.

At the youth league level, winning is often related to natural talent and/or size. The athletic success of the fleet, well-coordinated 5’10”, 165 pound, 12-year-old has little to do with hard work! While some athletes move up the competitive ladder and succeed because of their physical gifts, many others—perhaps the majority—succeed not merely because of natural talent, but because of some or all of the following qualities:

The Thirteen Admirable Qualities of Successful Athletes

1. A desire to learn.
2. A mastery of the fundamentals.
3. A mastery of advanced skills.
4. Proper execution of the plays.
5. The ability and maturity to listen to, and learn from, instructions and constructive criticism.
6. Self-discipline and self-control.
7. Goal setting.
8. The hard work, physical fitness, and willpower to achieve the goals.

9. The resiliency and perseverance to rebound from defeat.
10. The ability and maturity to engage in self-analysis and resetting of goals.
11. An unselfish commitment to teamwork.
12. The ability to focus and perform under pressure.
13. The tenacity to expend the extra effort needed down the stretch.

The Aftermath of Winning

The winner, especially one whose success is based on competing honorably, may experience the following benefits:

- The winner will justifiably feel good about the accomplishment.
- Winning will often produce a sense of self-confidence. Your job is to make sure this attitude is reflected through quiet and admirable self-assurance, as opposed to arrogance, which some misinterpret as self-confidence.
- The winner will often feel not just a bond, but a genuine love for those players and coaches who took the journey, overcame the obstacles, and shared in the success. Though not a sportsman, English cleric Charles Caleb Colton understood this concept when he wrote in 1825: “The firmest friendships have been formed in mutual adversity, as iron is most strongly united by the fiercest flame.”

THE ESSENTIAL QUALITY OF TENACITY

Just as the tenacity to expend the extra effort needed down the stretch is vital for athletic success, so, too, is tenacity a vital quality for sports parenting success.

Winning sports parents are so committed to the well-being of their child that they do as great athletes do in the fourth period of a tough game: they summon their inner strength and resolve to do what is right for the child, consistently overcoming rationalizations such as personal fatigue or protest from the child.

This quality of tenacity often separates good athletes from great athletes, and good parents from great parents!

A Point of Caution

“No meaningful success is achievable without meeting true resistance.” —Harvey Araton, *New York Times* sports columnist

A gifted athlete who is easily winning competitions may need stiffer competition. A young athlete learns little when achievement is gained without facing any real obstacles.

The Value of Losing

“Be a doer, not a stewart.”

—Senator Bob Dole

Facing failure and disappointment can be an essential learning experience for a young person. Our research of successful people demonstrated that they learned how to turn early disappointments into a resolve to achieve. At its best, the sports experience can help a youngster learn and practice methods for effectively dealing with failure and disappointment, a quality many successful people have mastered. For example, in *My Losing Season*, Pat Conroy’s wonderful book about his senior year as a point guard at the Citadel, he wrote that “The great secret of athletics is that you can learn more from losing than winning.”

Six Reasons Why Losing in Sports Can Help a Young Person Become a Winner in Life

1. Losing forces a player to analyze and make playing adjustments so as not to repeat mistakes.
2. Losing may help a player develop empathy for the losses or mistakes of others.
3. When faced with disappointment, an athlete learns to develop resiliency and mental toughness. Psychiatrist Dr. Richard Davidson points out that, “Stressful events give us practice at bouncing back from unpleasant emotions. They are like an exercise to strengthen our ‘happiness muscles,’ or a vaccination against melancholy.”⁴
4. Losing may help a player become more introspective. As Pat Conroy wrote, “Losing can help you consider those deeper stirrings that move beneath.”
5. The athlete who has faced defeat will appreciate success even more.
6. Losing can create a resolve to work harder and do better in future undertakings.

One of the things that came out of our surveys of successful people is that the athlete who frequently loses or is only moderately successful often finds within a desire to excel in future pursuits, and an awareness that there is plenty of time

to reach goals. “I knew I had the rest of my life to turn my disappointing sports career into success in new avenues to which I was better suited,” wrote one of our surveyed respondents.

In *My Losing Season*, Conroy wrote, “After our losing season, we went out and led our lives, and our losing season inspired every one of us to strive for complete and successful lives.”

Remind your player that:

- Many successful adults had losing records as athletes!
- Many successful former athletes have losing records as adults!

A LEGEND'S FORESIGHT

In 1965, Jackie Robinson worked as a TV analyst for ABC at the Little League World Series, in which a Windsor Locks (CT) team defeated a team from Ontario, Canada, for the championship. An innocent remark by Robinson about the noble effort of the Canadian team prompted a surprising response from a Connecticut resident, who wrote a letter to the *Hartford Courant* complaining about Robinson's “biased reporting.”

Not one to back away from a debate, Jackie Robinson wrote a letter of response to the *Courant*, in which he stated: “When I said the Canadians had nothing to be ashamed of, I meant it. They conducted themselves well. They gave a superior team a tough battle, and certainly deserve credit for their play.

“I implied nothing that the gentleman read into my remarks. I am certainly no expert in announcing, but try to call them as I see them.

“The writer reminds me of the parent I feel puts too much emphasis on winning, when we should be instilling in our youngsters the importance of being good losers as well.”

Jackie Robinson was ahead of his time in a number of ways.

Responding to Losses and Mistakes

Many successful athletes have mastered the art of effectively responding to losses and disappointments. Successful people view failure as feedback. They deal with it, learn from it, and move forward.

Parents can help their young athlete learn to deal with losses and mistakes by conveying appropriately balanced attitudes toward both winning and losing. Be sure to show as much pride in your player's effort as in the wins!

If your athlete has already developed poor responses to losing or disappointment, try to teach and regularly remind your youngster about the following points:

1. All sports involve mistakes and losses, and successful athletes must learn to deal with the strong emotions brought about by losing.
2. Successful athletes acknowledge and accept their disappointment, and then redirect their energy into learning from their mistakes.
3. Successful athletes do not mope about their mistakes! *They have learned how to quickly return to normal.*
4. Learning from mistakes and losses includes maintaining a positive attitude and:
 - Analyzing whether the loss/error was due to something the athlete did or failed to do.
 - Understanding that some bad plays are due to chance, timing, or actions of a teammate or opposing player.
 - Understanding that most games involve dozens of mistakes. “Basketball is a game of mistakes,” was the way Hall of Famer Bob Cousy once described his sport.
 - Refocusing on improving individual skills, teamwork, and execution—all of which may help prevent future errors.

Remember, as parents you must set the tone and encourage your youngster to practice the steps necessary to respond constructively to the emotional swings of losing and disappointment.

A Balanced Perspective

“Perspective: the relationship of aspects of a subject to each other and to a whole.” —The New Book of Knowledge

It is important to let your child know that you share her joy in winning and empathize with her disappointment upon losing, but that you will never be disappointed if she puts forth effort and plays honorably and within the rules of the game! When your athlete enjoys success, your job is to promote pride in the effort and point out the results obtained through her hard work. After a loss, your job is to help your athlete learn from it.

When parents make it clear that they most value their athlete's participation, integrity, and effort, not the win/loss record or star status, emotional balance will come more easily following both winning and losing.

I once heard a coach make the salient point that, “You can win and still not succeed, still not achieve what you should. And you can lose without really failing at all.” Help your player learn not to become intoxicated by success or defeated by failure, and understand that the difference between victory and defeat is sometimes measured in inches, milliseconds, or just luck.

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Finally, I offer two short poems that address elements of victory and defeat:



Lessons from Defeat

As the clock winds down
Reality screams
There'll be no happy ending
To pregame dreams.

Fleeting depression
Is aided along
By time's intercession
And an ode of the strong:

“For winners in life
No loss breaks their pace
They analyze and learn
Then get back in the race.”



Winning

The big game
Ends
In victory
Offspring of
Noble effort
Of team, body, and mind
A man of wealth
Could never buy
This feeling
This joy
So gloriously one of a kind.