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Parents Ruin Sports for Their Kids by Obsessing About Winning

By Lisa Endlich Heffernan

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Every sports cliché you can think of, I have uttered: teamwork, respect for the coach, being part of something bigger than yourself, and practice making perfect. But as I look back over a decade and a half watching my sons play sports, I have to confess the dirty truth: I wanted to win. I worked hard, I spent hours in preparation and I wanted to win. I had organized snacks and brought drinks. I

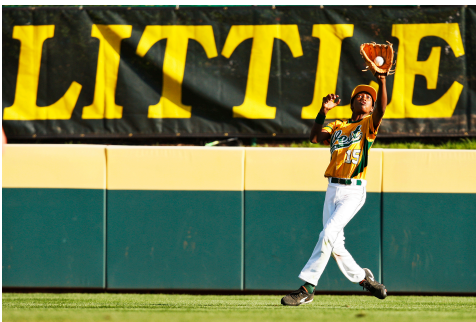
scrubbed uniforms and cleats. I drove for miles, arrived an hour early, stood in freezing temperatures, forsaken anything else I might have done with my day. I did not want to return home without a win.

The aching desire to win can be seen on the sidelines of competitions even among the youngest participants. Parents pace the sidelines, twitching at every kick or pitch or shot of the ball, shouting exhortations at their children and the team. I have watched parents cover their eyes, unable to watch, such is the stress they feel. In many cases it becomes clear that it is the parents who want to win. Parents want the dopamine thrill of winning, the heady rush that adults feel with success. Winning, even for spectators (and the research was done only on males), [gives a testosterone surge](#), and losing actually lowers hormone levels. As parents we so identify with our kids that their success quickly becomes our own. As spectators, parents seek confirmation even at the earliest stages that great athletic possibilities exist for their child: a better team, starting spot, varsity experience or college scholarship.

Soccer has kept my family close. Long car trips, weekends away, and a subject of shared interest that does not involve me mentioning the words “homework,” “study,” or “college” has drawn us together.

But it is all too easy, after a miserable, long drive, bumper to bumper down the New Jersey and then Pennsylvania turnpikes in foul winter weather, to forget why I have my kids play sports and just think, *They have got to win this game*. It starts so innocently, asking my child, “How is the team training? How good are these teams you are up against this weekend? Have you played them before and did you win? Do you think you guys can win this weekend?” No fake casual tone can hide the message: *I have driven across three states in wretched conditions and am now going to spend a weekend in a noisy hotel looking out over a highway or perhaps the garbage dumpsters, so you better make this worth my while*. No kid needs this pressure. Their coaches want to win, and their teammates want to win. Knowing that they could let down their parents is counterproductive.

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When my youngest son was about 10, he told me why he loved weekend soccer trips. Eighteen boys he likes, playing together on and off the field for 48 hours, with short breaks to sleep and eat junk food adds up to one happy kid. Winning? Winning, he told me, was fun, but even when they lost, the boys

had just as much fun together.

Parents think they want success for their kids but in many ways they want it for themselves. Their kids, it turns out, want pizza.

By focusing too heavily on winning not only do we parents fail to focus on what is important, but far worse, we refute what is important. We lose sight of sports as a vehicle for learning and, instead, convert it into a means for parents to live out their own athletic dreams or take a gamble on the unlikely event that sports will pave a road into college. I would argue that athletic competitions offer one of the very best venues for learning some of life's most important lessons. But these lessons don't require victories, and in fact many, like some of the following, are best taught in defeat:

There is always someone better than you, at everything.

Those who enforce the rules can be mistaken or even biased and conditions under which you have to operate are often bad.

You can do your very best and still not succeed. This isn't unfair, it just is.

People will cheat and you will lose because someone is not honest.

It is important, in fact essential, to continue trying hard long after success is no longer a possibility.

You must never let down those who have invested in you--teachers, coaches, parents and later bosses--even though your motivation has long since dissipated.

It is as important to learn how to be a gracious loser as it is to be a humble winner.

A team is about something much larger than any one person.

Individuals do not succeed, teams do.

Playing your role, whatever that role, is an honorable thing to do.

Intense physical activity is good for almost everything that ails us.

Kids feeling the endorphin-laced thrill of exertion will habituate into adopting a healthy lifestyle.

Sharing a goal is not the same as sharing success. The camaraderie of a team comes from the former not the latter.

One small mistake in an otherwise flawless performance can be the difference between winning and losing.

Practicing anything will make you better, more confident and, perhaps at some point, lead to success.

But you practice to become better and more confident.

Outcome cannot be controlled, only processes and effort.

Failing to win is not failing. Teams improve, players improve and that is success. You can play a great game and someone else can just play better. Failing to win can just be bad luck.

Part of the reality of modern-day childhood is that the stakes for kids at every action seem so much higher than they were for their parents. Between the very permanent record created by social media and the Internet to the hyper competitive college process, kids have few places they can safely fail.

Athletics is that place. The outcome of any given game is entirely meaningless and the playing field provides a place for kids to experience heated competition, losing, regrouping and beginning again,

without consequence. As parents stand on the sidelines baying for conquest, they give weight to something that, realistically, has little meaning and removes this golden chance to learn from loss.

Wanting to win is human, it always feels better than losing. But our larger job as parents is not to teach our kids to do what feels best, but rather to equip them for life without us. We are charged with taking the longterm view and teaching our children what is important rather than what is expedient. It is our job to teach them that they can only control their own effort, preparation and focus and not the outcome. And that is surely enough.

My youngest son is no longer 10, and while he still loves the camaraderie of his teams, when he steps on the soccer field he wants to win. In the waning days of his high school career, though, I hope that above all else he has learned the values of perseverance and fair play. And that one of the best parts of any competition is still grabbing a pizza afterwards.

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