

The Importance of Winning

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A major theme that runs throughout this site is the need for players of all ages to have fun while they're playing and learning baseball. By advocating the need for fun, I have unknowingly put myself in a position where many people assume that I don't think winning is important. Just to set the record straight, I love to compete and I love to win. **All things being equal**, it's much more fun to play for a team that wins the championship then it is to play for a team that just wins a few games. Like most people who have played the game for a number of years, I have been on both sides and **most of the time** the winning side is more enjoyable. Now you'll notice that I qualified both of the statements above to give myself a way out. As a coach and parent we have to look at how we emphasize winning with our team and be honest about whose ego is being inflated by having a championship team. In general terms, I believe that the joy of winning and being part of a special team can be ruined by parents and coaches who only have the goal of winning. On the other side, players can feel like they have had a great season without winning their league if they believe they not only improved but had a fun season.

Definition of "Fun"

Part of the confusion, I believe, stems from the definition of "fun". I think many people equate fun on the baseball field to a coach that has little control and provides a

supervised recess instead of a baseball practice. For parents and players alike, that type of atmosphere is frustrating and while it may provide moments of joy, most players hate playing in a non-structured environment. My definition of "fun" out on the field is "having structured and organized practices where players are challenged and are **allowed to enjoy playing and learning the game**". I highlighted the second part of the statement because I have seen many coaches that are very organized; run well structured practices; teach great fundamentals; provide positive feedback; but do it in a way that doesn't promote fun. Drills are great, but they can be boring. You may be proud of your 12 station batting practice that runs as smooth as silk, but if the kids aren't enjoying it, then chances are they aren't trying hard to master the skills either. While the practice may be organized, it may not be challenging the players to improve. This is often where coaches will become frustrated and begin to rely on yelling and punishment to get players motivated to play harder. In my experience, if players aren't willing to play hard during practice, then they either don't like baseball and are playing because they were signed up by a parent or more likely, they're bored.

I never have a goal for my team of winning the league or winning a certain number of games. If the kids bring it up, I just let them know that my expectation is simply that they always give their best effort. Now I believe in positive coaching, but I believe you also have to be honest with your players about the effort they are giving. If the goal is effort, then you have to let players know when they are not meeting those expectations. Don't embarrass or belittle the player in front of his family and teammates, but let him know that he needs to always

give his best effort. Winning and losing is a result that can't be guaranteed, but good preparation and effort are things that everyone can achieve.

The Goal of Winning

So what's wrong with setting goals and talking about winning? Often those goals are unrealistic or wishful thinking. In an 8 team league, if every coach told his team that the goal is to win the league, it would lead to 7 teams that fail. In addition, if winning is the only goal, the pressure to perform can be very intense for young athletes. We see college and pro level athletes that have failed to perform up to their ability when under extreme pressure situations. These are athletes that you would expect could handle the stress and many times they can't. Take this down to the youth level and you can see that adding pressure to a young athlete to perform will decrease, not increase, the chances of success.

It's Okay to Fail

What gives your players and team the best chance of success? I want a team that gives great effort and isn't afraid to fail either individually or as a team. While this is easier said than done, if can get them close to that, then I have a team that will play loose and play with confidence because they aren't afraid of what will happen if they don't perform or they don't win. Fear of failure is a major reason why many players fail in critical situations. I try to get my players to understand that the best baseball players in the world fail on a regular basis and one aspect that makes them special is their ability to learn from the failure and try to improve. There are many quotes that you can give from professional players and

coaches to emphasize this point, I like this one from Greg Maddux: "Failure is the best teacher in the world; you get to learn from what happens to you - both good and bad - in a real-live game situation."

Summary

Is winning important? Yes, it's important. Kids know the score. They get disappointed when they lose and they're happy when they win. They often see greater pride and acceptance from parents and coaches when the team wins and they perform well. That desire can place a great amount of pressure on the player. As a coach and parent it's important that you put winning and losing in the proper perspective. Make sure goals are achievable and tied to effort not results. If you focus on creating a positive and productive practice environment, your players will flourish and the wins will come.

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