

It's Time to Redefine – Success

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There is a major issue lurking around the corner of every rink. It's not swine flu and it's not the smell of hockey socks. Its high school and youth sport parents, coaches, spectators, and athletes behaving badly. All for the bottom line – winning and glory!

Take a look at the newspapers, watch sports networks, or listen to AM sports talk – what is the focus of most of the media's time? It is about the bottom line; wins and losses, heroes and goats, contracts and hold outs. When the focus is so much on “winning,” are we surprised that athletes take steroids, cheat, and play dirty?

Don't get me wrong the bottom line is important. Winning and being a highly successful athlete is important...

Tell me two things that all of these athletes have in common:

Roger Clemens
Mark McGwire
Marion Jones
Chris Simon
Marty McSorley

They were winners and they all cheated, were poor sports, or played dirty in the name of winning. What do we remember them for now? Ask a teenager what they know about these athletes. I don't think they will remember much about their accomplishments.

Winning is important, but not at the expense of your reputation, dignity, or health. Isn't there a lot more to living than always to be “one-up” on someone else? Unfortunately, for many to “win at all-costs” is the prevailing mindset. Coaches are fired because they don't win a bowl game or make the “big dance” every year. Championships are expected not appreciated. Winning has become necessary to validate your existence as a professional franchise or a collegiate program. Otherwise, why compete?

The professional model of sports is based on winning and entertainment, and *money*. Although not always great role models, there is nothing inherently wrong with professional sports. If we accept that then maybe we can understand professional sports. To quote Dennis Green, “they are who we thought they were.” Pro sports and Division 1 as well, exist in a win at all costs culture. That is the way it has become. Unfortunately, this model has trickled down to high school and youth sports.

How has a professional model of sport worked its way into the younger age groups that exist for the development of youth in a healthy environment? Well, with the majority of our coaches in youth sport being parents I believe they get their philosophy on the game from listening to the media and watching professional sports. Coach X yells at his players during timeouts to motivate them, so this must be how

to get the most out of my squirts. What that parent-coach doesn't know is that Coach X is feeling the pressure to win or he will be fired.

But, it has got to be more than that, right? There are a lot of very smart people who do very mean-spirited things in the name of winning – like benching kids for no good reason, screaming at players because they are not producing, and cursing at officials. It could be that their self-esteem is wrapped up into winning the game. Or, when the competition starts they have trouble managing their emotions. Whatever the reasons, a large number of adults in youth sport need a reality check.

The model at the youth and high school level must revert back to its origins – developing young adults, not developing superstar athletes. But, how can we ever get back to the origins of sport when parents and young athletes are feeling great pressure to develop their talents and win? It is difficult because if your son does not travel to Canada for a camp during the summer or makes a certain club, then you feel he is behind other players in his age group. It's become the sports version of "Keeping up with the Joneses".

As adults we need to snap youth and high school sport back into perspective. We need to redefine what it means to be successful. Success is more than the scoreboard or the scholarship. Success does not have to be embarrassing someone by scoring and then celebrating at their expense. Success should be more about the original goals of youth and high school sport – fun, making friends, learning life lessons and skills, and developing your physical and psychological skills. These goals are often forgotten or de-emphasized on a Friday night or Saturday afternoon.

To be successful is a natural instinct and something to pursue in a dignified manner. However, the pursuit of success seems to be undergoing a change. Today, success needs to be immediate and failure is something to avoid at all costs. Society tells us that if you lose you are a loser, and if you win you are better until the end of time. Or until the loser gets revenge... Think about the Buffalo Bills of the 1990's. They made it to four consecutive Super Bowls, an amazing feat that probably won't be repeated for some time. Yet, society looked at the Bills as the #1 loser because they did not win a Super Bowl. What kind of message is this sending? To pursue excellence you have to win the championship or it's a failure? That means that at every Olympics 99% of the athletes are losers. Do we really believe this?

While working as a hockey director I tackled the issue of avoiding failure. I evaluated and placed youth on rosters to create a competitive environment and hopefully to create some parity (where coaches were not stacking or recruiting). It was not a perfect process but it worked pretty well. Nonetheless, a team of 9 and 10 year olds were losing most of their games. The coaches and parents were furious. How could I allow this team to lose? It was unfair. It was destroying their self-confidence. At first thought you might agree with this argument. However, how difficult is it to account for growth spurts and rapid learning? Or, for excellent coaching? Winning games is never guaranteed. More importantly, whatever happened to learning from losing? By focusing only on the scoreboard these parents and coaches missed ample opportunities to teach life lessons about perseverance and learning from losing. They did not redefine success by setting goals on the process such as improving every day, giving full effort, or working together as a team. Instead, they chose to perceive it as a terrible experience which the kids accepted after hearing it for awhile. Winning is not guaranteed to anyone nor should it be a requirement in youth and high school sport.

Sure, we want all kids to win some games. But, that is not what it's all about. Success means putting yourself and your skills out there; to give your best; to healthy competition. Fortunately, this is exactly

what many great youth, high school, collegiate, and professional coaches emphasize. Focus on the process, on the journey to winning championships and to receiving a scholarship because those “carrots” are captured only by a few. If you only focus on the carrot and you don’t reach it then it is likely you will feel like a failure and that you wasted your time. On the contrary, you have done something noble – the pursuit of excellence.

How do we redefine success and the societal trend to focus on the bottom line? How do we stop equating success with winning only? Keeping sport in perspective is a good start. Let’s attempt to focus our conversations with youth about the healthy goals of sport – fun and development. After games let’s start by asking if they had fun or what a joy it was to give it all.

Let’s also get back to teaching confidence and character through the game and to all youth. Help youth feel successful by emphasizing what they can learn from all situations – life lessons. And, emphasize what they control – their effort, improvement, and teamwork, for example. These alternate meanings of success can help them maintain their self-confidence even during slumps and losing seasons, and can in fact make them very strong in future adverse situations.

How do you get youth to buy into redefining success? It is a tough sell because many youth are concerned with winning, comparing themselves to others, and getting their name in the paper. Pursuing success should be viewed as a long term developmental process. Success at 8 years old is not necessarily winning a tournament. Instead, it should be learning to handle the puck, make great moves, and finish with a strong shot on the net. Talk to kids about the journey to their outcome goals of winning, scholarships, and glory. Have players focus on “how to” win and play great versus “having to” win and play great. You achieve these things through the process of working hard every day, making good decisions, and dealing with setbacks in a positive way. Even Michael Jordan had to deal with setbacks. Remember the story about him being cut from a basketball team...

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