

LEARN TO PLAY THE DIAMONDBACKS WAY

With millions of youth ages five to teen hood flooding our fields, courts, and rinks, it's a good time to ask: Are youth sports about winning? I suspect that not all agree, but as a father of seven children who has been to countless sporting events and also competed as a wrestler "back in the day," I am convinced of this:

Youth athletics are not about winning.

Now I didn't say that every child should get a gold trophy at the end of the season just for showing up or that we should, as was so well stated in the movie *The Incredibles*, "create new ways to celebrate mediocrity." What I am saying is youth athletics exist for these purposes:

- * Aerobic exercise for kids today who need it badly (since nobody really walks anywhere anymore!)
- * Team building. Critical lessons in collaboration: Co-labor = Working together. An excellent ability to possess.
- * Fun. Pure fun. It's still true and always will be: It's fun to have fun.
- * Commitment. Disciplining oneself to stay with something even when it's not easy is a good thing.
- * Skill development. It's healthy to learn to run, hit, kick, swing, shoot, pass, and catch correctly when young.
- * Relationship building. Making friends is always worthwhile.

Notice that winning is not on the list, not even at the bottom. Why? Because when that becomes an objective, I'm afraid we fail to build the character in youth that we desire. The "Winning is everything!" mantra seems to bring about bad stuff. Maybe you've witnessed some of this too:

- * Adult coaches become children again throwing tantrums that would embarrass a toddler.
- * A soccer mom instructs her nine-year-old son at half-time, "Tell your coach he shouldn't have you on Defense, you're a Forward."
- * Parents scream at referees, and sometimes those refs are only teenagers themselves.
- * Coaches model excuse-making by blaming losses on field conditions, weather, officials, and cheating opponents.
- * Superstars are allowed to break team rules or not meet certain standards because, well, they're the superstars.
- * Parents and participants, especially when losing, fail to applaud the accomplishments of their competitors.
- * Basketball dads bellow loud enough for all to hear, "Come on, you can shoot better than that!!!"—at his own daughter.
- * Teammates treat each other poorly during competition with mean-spirited and "bossy" behavior, while coaches look the other way.
- * Weekend tourneys become so essential that holidays and Sundays—family and church time—are devalued.
- * Obsessed grandparents bark from the sidelines, "How can you be tired?! You're not tired! Get back out there and play harder!"
- * Less talented kids don't get to play much. And to be honest, some kids never play. Now that is a sad sight to see.
- * Coaches bawl the youth out post game causing them to lower their heads in shame.

Find me a coach that cares for the children's mental and emotional health, allows each team member equal playing time regardless of ability, shows no favoritism, teaches skills during the practices but encourages during the competitions, instructs the youth to honor adults and peers alike, and models life-success principles such as fairness, kindness, integrity, servanthood, accountability, forgiveness, and joy in all things, and I will sign my kid up immediately for this Dream Team.

My dad, Jimmy Miller, was a champion wrestler at Cornell University in the 1940s and coached the team from 1949-1975. I can still picture him in the late 1960s, when I was a boy, kneeling at the edge of the mat with both hands cupped around his mouth like a mini megaphone, encouraging his wrestlers with, "Come on, Peter!" "You can do it, Dick!" "Let's go, Buzzy!" If those young men lost that day, they still knew one thing: Their coach loved and accepted them just the way they were. Those athletes are now successful men in their 60s, and all speak highly of Coach Jimmy. I know that for him, when painfully watching his youngest son (me) flailing and failing on the mat, it wasn't about achieving a victory that day. It was about becoming victorious in life. That's the kind of coach I would want. Come to think of it, that's the coach I had.

Now that's winning.

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