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Winning and Losing

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Winning and Losing

Abstract

"There will always be winners and losers, but the focus should be on the process and not the outcome."

Posting about character development through sports from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/winning-and-losing/>

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Disciplines

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Comments

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Winning and Losing

 inallthings.org/winning-and-losing/

Mark Christians

As a person who competed in a variety of high school and college athletics and also coaching experiences in college golf, high school basketball, soccer, baseball, and tennis, I am familiar with winning and losing in both roles of athlete and coach. A competitive athlete will inevitably experience both the “thrill of victory and the agony of defeat,” as Jim McKay stated in the introduction to the Wide World of Sports television show that aired from 1961 to 1998. This sports show was one I watched religiously each week to see great athletes compete and experience either the thrill or the agony. The agony of defeat for me came from coaching a high school baseball team to a record of 0 – 14. We practiced regularly, we put forth strong effort, and we encouraged each other; we just weren’t very good at baseball.

The experience of winning and losing starts at a young age, when the two-year-old wants to race mom to the corner. The child is likely to declare herself the winner, especially if they are the one that wins since mom purposely runs slow enough to allow the child to win. As the two-year-old grows into an elementary student, they encounter more opportunities to win or lose; for example the 3rd grade spelling bee, in the Tetherball game at recess, and eventually in the AAU volleyball tournaments starting in 5th grade where winning and losing take on new and significant meaning.

I have found the outcome of winning or losing as being valued more in our society than the process that leads to the outcome. As a golf coach, I remind my athletes often that the process is much more important than the outcome. My team may be much more talented than our opponent and win the contest easily, but that type of win can actually be less instructive than losing to a team with similar ability or talent. The point being that not all wins are equal and not all losses are equal either. The process that leads to a particular win or loss is what teaches the athlete the more enduring lessons of preparation, effort, teamwork, focus, and sportsmanship.

On occasion, someone will ask me a question like this, “Do you remember the college basketball game you played against South Dakota State University?” My answer is typically, “Yes, I remember that we lost but I don’t have too many distinct memories of that particular game.” Since this event happened more than 30 years ago, it makes sense that my memory recall is not full and complete. What lingers more in my memory are **not** the wins and losses, but the relationships with teammates and coaches, the time spent driving to each game talking and studying, and the daily routine of practice. Don’t get me wrong, there are a few lasting memories of wins against arch rivals or a basket made at the buzzer to win the game. As the months and years go by, the lasting memories are more related to the process rather than the outcome. This I believe is a healthy psychological approach to competition and more healthy than portrayed by Uncle Rico in the movie Napoleon Dynamite, who even though he was twenty plus years out of high school, was still upset with his coach for not putting him in the 4th quarter of a key football game and claiming that this prevented him from being a pro football player. Though a humorous example of an inflated athletic self-image, it is a good example of how the pursuit of winning can lead to a life of singular focus on the outcome, rather than the process.

Besides being a psychology professor, I also coach our college men’s and women’s golf teams. In my 14 years of coaching golf, I’ve had successful teams who finished in the top five of our conference and I’ve coached teams who finished near the bottom of our conference. Since I am competitive by nature, I want my teams to play well, compete for high finishes in golf meets, and advance to regional or national golf tournaments. I have achieved some of these goals and have fallen short of meeting other goals. I need to remind myself daily that these goals are earthly and fleeting. My goals should and do focus on playing the game with Christian character, respecting the rules of the game and with our playing partners, and enjoying God’s creation while on the golf course.

Golf is a unique team sport where your individual score contributes to a team score. There are no teammates to blame or give credit for your score. Each player is on their own to compete against the conditions (wind, rain, heat) and the golf course (trees, hills, hazards). A golfer is easily distracted with the potential outcome of their score, especially if they start playing well and have many pars and even some birdies. As soon as they look ahead to the possibility of a low score, they are likely going to bogey, double-bogey, or worse on subsequent holes. The key to winning the psychology of golf is learning to play in the moment and putting away all thoughts of previous shots or future shots. The golfer who maintains their focus on the present will likely have a better score than the player who is lamenting a shot four holes prior or anticipating the thrill of carding their personal best and they still have five holes left to play.

There will always be winners and losers, but the focus should be on the process and not the outcome. Vince Lombardi, legendary coach of the Green Bay Packers, had it all wrong when he said, "Winning isn't everything, it's the only thing."