

When “Winning” is not Winning

By Adam Sarancik

During the first week of the season, I watched an 11 year-old pitch one inning of a pre-season game against a much superior team. He threw only fastballs, surrendered six runs on thirty four pitches, six hits, three walks, four defensive errors and two dropped third strikes with the batter advancing safely to first base. During his pitching, the player exhibited frustration with his own performance and the lack of support by his defense. When the pitcher finished the inning, he was greeted with a “nice job” by his coaches, and seemed generally satisfied and relieved that he survived his outing without giving up more damage.

I witnessed this same player pitch four innings in the last game of the season. He threw both fastballs and change-ups, 54 pitches, struck out six batters, gave up four unearned runs on four hits, two of which were “home runs” on errors by the outfielders and missed relays. Two runners were picked off first base and one at second base (although none were thrown or tagged out) on pick-off moves that would make a high school pitcher proud. He was calm and composed the entire time and supported his teammates in every way during the game. Once again, at the end of his turn, he was greeted with a “nice job” by his coaches. However, this time when he arrived to the bench, he was visibly very upset. The game and the season for the Tigers ended about 15 minutes later.

Despite the best efforts of his coaches and parents to console him after the game, the tears continued to flow. When asked why he was so upset he exclaimed, “I did terrible. I’m a horrible pitcher and player. I hate baseball!” That would be his last and most indelible memory from the season.

By any objective measure, this pitcher had obviously improved significantly in every tangible and intangible way. Yet, the player did not realize or feel any of it. He only knew that his team was 2-19 and he failed to “win” a single game as a pitcher. In his words, he and his team “were a bunch of losers.”

Why was there such a disconnect between his perception and reality?

First, the district and league set this team up for disappointment. There were no regulations at this age for limiting mismatches. No rules existed for stopping an inning after a given number of runs were scored or stopping a game when the “winning” team was ahead by a given number of runs after a certain number of innings. The Tigers lost almost all of their games by 10+ runs and were behind by as many as 21 runs in one inning. Most games were only remarkable by the number of runs scored by both teams

by walks, stolen bases, wild pitches, passed balls, and errors. Rarely, did a team on offense have more hits than walks or errors by the defense.

Second, the priority for all teams was on playing games and not on practicing to improve athleticism and individual skills. The players' abilities did not improve during the season regardless of the team's record, the pitchers' ERA's or the hitters' averages except through private coaching outside the league.

Finally, and most important, "winning" was defined solely by the final score. Prior to the season, the league and its coaches should have established a list of process-oriented goals for pitchers, position players and hitters and a list of *life skills* to be taught *proactively* during the season. These goals should have been tracked, recorded, communicated and rewarded after every practice and game regardless of the score.

If this had been done, the Tigers' pitcher would have ended his last game and the season with a smile on his face, a huge boost to his self-esteem, and a growing love for his sport. At a minimum, he would have recognized he was able to throw two pitches for strikes in any count, had developed excellent pick-off moves to first and second base, and could pitch with confidence and composure no matter the support he was getting from his defense. Most importantly, he was able to support his teammates regardless of how he was performing individually.

Sadly, after observing youth sports for more than four decades, the scenario of the Tiger's pitcher is the rule, not the exception. Despite the best efforts of all coaches to rehab hurt feelings and damaged self-esteems, players only feel like "winners" when their teams win the game. Most youth coaches do not realize that a won-loss record is not indicative of good coaching, a "winning" team or players' long-term success. Players do not realize that elite statistics do not necessarily indicate improved or elite skills.

Training, tracking and rewarding the process of sport and life skills develops champions, *Champions for Life*.

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