



THE ENEMY OF EXCELLENCE IN YOUTH SPORTS

By John O'Sullivan

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"My daughter is the tallest fourth grader in her class and loves to play basketball," said a father to me recently. "Sadly, I know that she will ultimately grow to be of average height. Since she is now only allowed to rebound and give the ball to shorter ball-handler players on her team, she will never develop the skills she will need to play basketball. After her last game, she told her 5-year-old sister that she did not shoot or score because her job is to rebound and play defense, because that is what her coach told her. What should I do?"

The plight of this parent highlights what I believe to be the greatest obstacle to a child-centered youth sports environment.

It causes many children to become discouraged and quit.

It turns the focus of youth sports away from the priorities and needs of children, and toward the values of adults. It cuts at the very essence of what sports are supposed to be about: a quest for excellence.

Sadly, this girl and millions of kids just like her are playing sports in an environment not designed to make them better in the long term. They are caught up in an adult obsession to solely measure youth sports results in wins and losses, and it is killing youth sports in our country.

Comments by NBA stars Kobe Bryant and LeBron James, as well as basketball coach Alan Stein, about the emphasis on playing games instead of practicing, and winning at the expense of teaching the game the right way, have made headlines recently. They reminded me of this great video by NBA coach Stan Van Gundy about the massive amount of youth basketball coaches dedicated to winning as opposed to skill development.

But this is not a basketball problem. It is a youth sports problem. It exists in every team sport.

OUR OBSESSION WITH WINNING IS THE ENEMY OF EXCELLENCE IN YOUTH SPORTS! WE HAVE TURNED OUR ATTENTION AWAY FROM DEVELOPING EXCELLENCE IN OUR ATHLETES, AND NOW ONLY FOCUS ON IMMEDIATE SUCCESS.

As a result, we do the following:

- > Play too many games and do not practice enough.
- > Select "talent" for short-term gains instead of identifying and developing all athletes and focusing on long-term potential.
- > Make cuts and select all-star teams at younger and younger ages, making youth sports an elitist undertaking for early developers and those with the financial means to participate.
- > Require year-round participation to be a part of elementary-school-age youth teams, which goes against the advice of physicians, psychologists and sociologists.
- > Teach and coach strategies that provide short-term results at the expense of long-term development.

I know there are some reading this just dying to write that I am anti-competition, and believe we should give everyone a trophy and sing Kumbaya after every activity regardless of outcome.

That is not me.

I am competitive. I love winning. I have coached high-level athletes who have gone on to be college, national team and professional soccer players for over two decades. And I believe that every time an athlete takes the field, he or she should give maximum effort in the pursuit of victory.

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But players who play to win is one thing, and has nothing to do with coaches who only coach to win, and organizations that create environments focused on winning and not development. Their approach actually robs kids of their athletic education, and sets them up for failure later in life.

These coaches love to say, "We are developing winners," but they are not. They are actually developing losers because they are not giving their players the tools to compete and win later at higher levels of sport.

That fourth-grade basketball player I mentioned earlier is not learning to dribble or shoot, two essential skills for any basketball player, especially one who won't crack the six foot barrier! And why? "Because her job is to rebound and play defense" to help the team win!

The biggest problem today is that players flock to clubs and coaches that win, and rarely do parents take the time to think, "Is this a good place for both my child's long-term athletic development, and personal development?"

Great coaches and developmentally focused organizations often lose their best players to these "elite" winning clubs who promise championships and scholarships. True athlete-focused coaches play all their players, and lose a few games in the process by teaching for the long term, yet season after season end up having to find new players to replace the ones who left for the "winning" clubs.

You see, teaching a tall 10 year old to dribble and play guard will likely lose you a few basketball games, but it will make that 10 year old a better basketball player. Teaching your young soccer players to be creative, to try and pass out of the back and beat players 1v1 will cost you goals and games, but it will make them much more adept players when it really matters. And letting everyone pitch in Little League, as well as limiting pitch counts and actually practicing instead of simply playing games, will develop better baseball players, but not win you all your games.

Our obsession with winning is without a doubt the enemy of excellence in youth sports.

I have always loved this quote from the late Joe Paterno:

"THERE ARE MANY PEOPLE, PARTICULARLY IN SPORTS, WHO THINK THAT SUCCESS AND EXCELLENCE ARE THE SAME THING. THEY ARE NOT THE SAME THING. EXCELLENCE IS SOMETHING THAT IS LASTING AND DEPENDABLE AND LARGELY WITHIN A PERSON'S CONTROL. IN CONTRAST, SUCCESS IS PERISHABLE AND IS OFTEN OUTSIDE OUR CONTROL. IF YOU STRIVE FOR EXCELLENCE, YOU WILL PROBABLY BE SUCCESSFUL EVENTUALLY. PEOPLE WHO PUT EXCELLENCE IN THE FIRST PLACE HAVE THE PATIENCE TO END UP WITH SUCCESS. AN ADDITIONAL BURDEN FOR THE VICTIM OF THE SUCCESS MENTALITY IS THAT HE IS THREATENED BY THE SUCCESS OF OTHERS AND HE RESENTS REAL EXCELLENCE. IN CONTRAST, THE PERSON THAT IS FASCINATED BY QUALITY IS EXCITED WHEN HE SEES IT IN OTHERS."

Excellence is all about the process, while winning is all about the outcome.

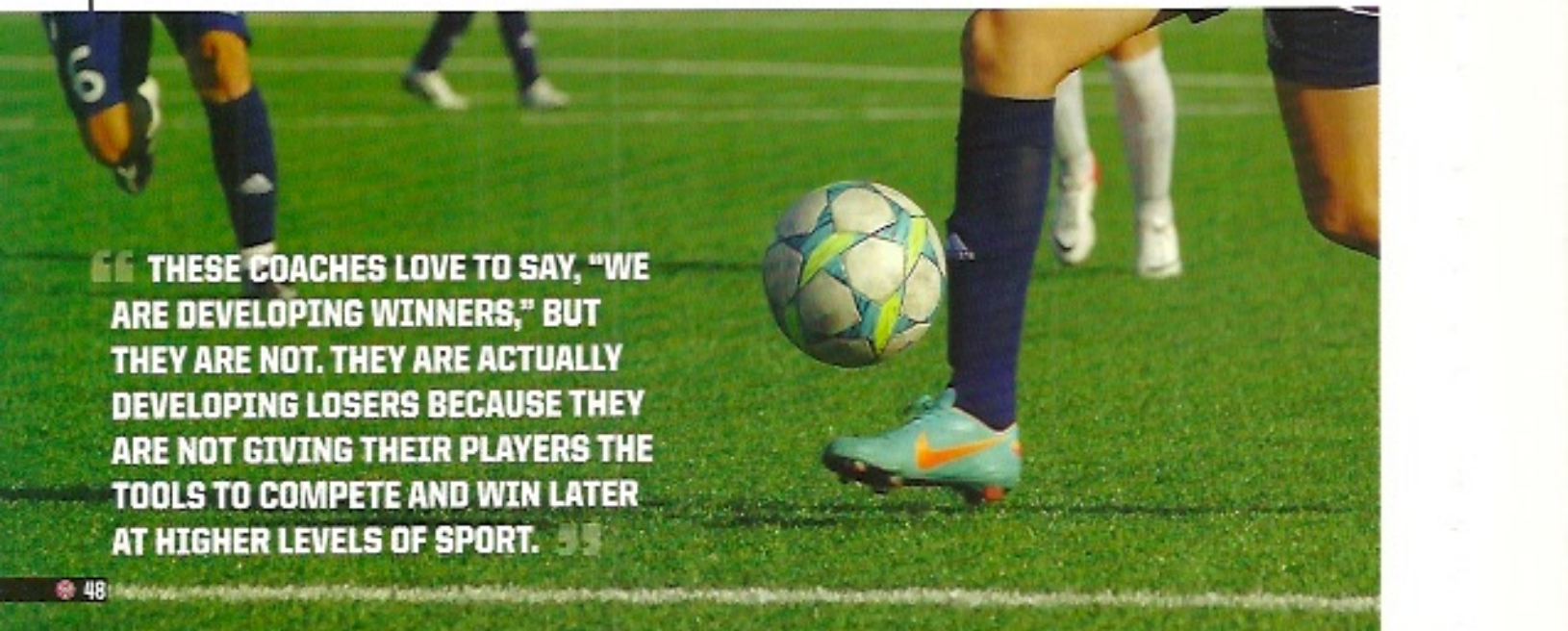
Excellence promotes the growth mindset that Dr. Carol Deck has identified as crucial to learning and high performance, while a focus on winning promotes the destructive, outcome-oriented fixed mindset that fears failure and dismisses effort as meaningless.

Excellence allows room for failure and learning, while an obsession with winning does not.

Excellence-based youth sports programs allow every player to develop at his or her own pace, while results-oriented teams only use those players who can help them now. Excellence inevitably leads to success, while outcome-focused achievement rarely yields excellence.

Do you really want your child to win every game for the rest of his life? That can be arranged. Play in a bad league, play in low-level tournaments, and sure enough you can win them all. But why? There will be boredom, little learning, and no challenge.

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“ THESE COACHES LOVE TO SAY, “WE ARE DEVELOPING WINNERS,” BUT THEY ARE NOT. THEY ARE ACTUALLY DEVELOPING LOSERS BECAUSE THEY ARE NOT GIVING THEIR PLAYERS THE TOOLS TO COMPETE AND WIN LATER AT HIGHER LEVELS OF SPORT. ”

So if we can agree that we don't need, or want, to win all our games because it is not necessarily a good thing, shouldn't we stop worrying when we lose one or two in a weekend?

If we are ever to once again create a player-centered youth sports environment, one that prioritizes the needs and values of our kids over the adults involved in sports, we need to shift this paradigm.

We need an excellence-based youth soccer system such as Iceland (population 320,000), which wouldn't even qualify as a small city in the United States (pop. 316 million), yet has a similar FIFA world ranking and produces more European professional players than the US.

We need better coaching and a developmentally focused youth hockey system like Sweden (pop. 9.5 million), which revamped its youth hockey program in 2002 and now is third in the world behind the US and Canada (pop. 35 million) in producing NHL players.

We need to teach fundamental basketball like Serbia (pop. 7 million), which allowed them to reach the finals of the 2014 World Championships.

While each of these countries' sporting systems has their own coaching and player development models, they have one commonality: they have small populations and, therefore, must maximize the potential of every athlete.

As a result, they focus on excellence and development of their young athletes, and let the winning come as a result of development, not in place of it.

What is the path forward?

Here are a few suggestions to shift this paradigm from an outcome-driven nightmare to an excellence-driven developmental model.

PARENTS:

- > Start educating yourselves on the organizations you are a part of, and the science of athletic development, performance, and child psychology. So many parents are allowing their kids to be short-changed, led by lousy role models, and even bullied, in order to win a \$10 trophy or two.
- > Start letting your kids compete with other kids like you used to as a child, and stop competing with other adults through your kids (and posting the results on Facebook and Instagram).
- > Stop worrying about winning and find better ways to measure the success of your child's sports program!
- > Please demand that your schools and youth sports clubs hire transformational coaches who value your child and treat him or her with the respect and dignity they deserve in victory and defeat, and then support those coaches!
- > Say something, share this article, tell one person, do anything to make a difference.
- > Your money talks, so have the courage to speak up and walk when your kids are not being served.

COACHES:

- > For those of you who are doing it right, developing athletes and teaching them about sport and life, keep doing what you are doing. I know how hard it is to be a teacher, mentor and trusted ally of your athletes these days, but we need you more than ever. Don't give up!
- > For those of you who are in it simply for the paycheck and/or your ego, and go around trophy hunting and churning through kids to serve yourself, ask yourself this simple question posed to me by a legendary swimming coach I once met: "How can you be disloyal to a sport that is giving you a life?" You drive kids out of a game you claim to love, and you give a bad name to a vocation that you have turned into a profession. Please change, or please find something else to do, but don't coach.

YOUTH SPORTS ORGANIZATIONS:

- > You are the gatekeepers of youth sports. You set the philosophy and the tone; you make youth sports a place for development or simply a place to separate winners and losers. Please take a stand.
- > Do a better job with parent education. Parents love their kids, and they want to help, but no one teaches them how to help! So many of you pay homage to parent education by having them sign a worthless code of conduct, or by burying a page of do's and don'ts on your website. So many well-paid coaching directors I know tell me they don't have any money in their budget for parent education, but then tell me they spend half their time dealing with parent issues. "Uh, so what you are saying is that you actually do spend \$40,000 on cleaning up the mess, but cannot find \$2,000 to prevent it?" Bring in the Changing the Game Project, or Positive Coaching Alliance, or Proactive Coaching, or Bob Bigelow, and start teaching parents how to help sports belong to their kids when they are young, and keep teaching them year after year. It works!
- > Do a better job supporting and educating your coaches, especially the volunteers. We have one preseason meeting, hand them an outdated PDF coaching manual, tell them how to watch for concussions and then throw them to the wolves. They need better ideas for practices. They need modern tools (check out my new venture TheDrillBook.com, it's FREE). They need to know how to handle lopsided games, and how to get rid of lines and lectures. The more you do for them, the more of them will come back year after year because it will be an enjoyable experience.

THE ENEMY OF EXCELLENCE IN YOUTH SPORTS IS THE OBSESSION WITH WINNING.

It is driving children out of sports and toward sedentary lifestyles, and it is not preparing them to succeed in sport or in life. We need this to change.

You can be the change. You can help start this revolution simply by sharing this article with one other person, or telling one person about this work.

We need you! Our kids need you.