

## **“THE WANT TO WIN”** By Graham Ramsay

Winning proves everything we are told. It identifies perfection and the highest ideals of sport, so we are led to believe and yet we have all these awards and winners but far fewer real players and coaches. The problem is compounded by the Al Davis's of this world who trumpet out, “win baby, win” everyday in the media. Statistics back up the claims and the vast army of youth coaches and parents suddenly see the Holy Grail of success staring directly at them. Winning solves and proves all. Or does it?

At professional level, a win is a win is a win. You have yet to see a pro coach reject an ugly win. On the other hand four or five losses, its haste la vista” and on your bike! These coaches know most of a player's development is done by their late teens and competition is the next phrase of heightening that talent. They know their athletes have matured both physically and mentally to deal with the many ups and downs of pro sports. Mr. Davis is totally correct about the importance of a win in the pro arena but down on the sandlot he would probably rephrase his quote to, “learn, baby learn.”

Unfortunately the youth scene takes these images of the only thing in life are to win without thinking about the environment and youngsters. It looks the same – the ball, the field, the game, the uniforms, etc. So they mimic the picture that is on the screen and learn to talk the talk. It's official with all these mini-pros and Buddy Ryan look-a-likes pacing the touchlines. They have, however, forgotten two things- the children and their development needs. To blindly imitate means short term winning and long term losing. It looks good at the beginning, winning the U.5's Post-Natal Cup, pounding opponents into the ground with an incredible winning record. “This is what it's all about!” PuttPutt here we come!” Suddenly, parents who up to that point used to get a nose bleed competing at checkers are talking contracts and scholarships for their youngsters. Luckily sanity is slightly restored when children turn round and say “we've had enough. Skateboards and the open road, here we come.” Off they go, never to be seen on a competitive sports field again.

A word for the very competitive coach; COACH ADULTS and not children. Any egocentric adult can bully youngsters to some degree but try the same techniques on adults. Now if they enjoy the screaming and bullying methods, then you have found a mutual home for your talents. The ground is even and you can trade insults freely, but youngsters deserve better. They are looking for leadership and a role model, not the second coming of Adolph and other sporting tyrants. Rumor has it, Mel Brooks got his inspiration for his movie “Springtime for Hitler” from studying this species “coaching” at an Easter tournament. You can't win them all!

This so call “winning mentality” often puts youngsters in the losing column as they opt out of sport to calmer pastures, where they can make their own decisions without the constant baying of adult “expertise”. Who can blame them? If those same parents were on the receiving end of the same verbal assault, they would probably join the rest of the drop-outs looking for tranquility.

Is too much winning bad for a child's sports health? I feel it can be if it is held as the be all and end all of playing a game. The pressure to win inflicted upon a child or a team above all else is closing the door on their development. The fun of playing goes out of the window and is substituted by a bottom line mentality of fun can only be derived from winning. Young players need the freedom to experiment, to fail, and fail again and again without the constant heat of competition scalding their errors. Think of how many times Michael Jordan must have failed in learning various moves? Luckily he was allowed the freedom to try, try again until the ugly duckling of a move became a thing of soaring beauty. Skill takes years of nurturing as it is like planting seed, needing caring attention before it blooms for all to see. You can't cheat or cheapen the process as the muse is too demanding and won't be short changed by the promise of a trophy or a winning record. It demands a deeper commitment from the player to develop the self motivation to practice over and over again, to chase the rainbow, to find perfection.

A coach cannot do it for a player, but they can help them by drip-feeding encouragement and being a good role model.

For youth coaches, it is vital to maintain the priority of learning the basics well, both in soccer and life skills. It is all about development of a child within a great game, from getting clever with a ball to becoming a brilliant teammate. That's real winning. Fortunately, the muse refuses to give fake rewards like cups as it chooses to challenge the intellect and heart. It rewards effort, skill and self motivational attitudes. Those are the real prizes. How do you measure those qualities? In return, a player wins a priceless passion for a sport and a never-say-die mentality to learning.

When does competition become important? From the late teens or when our youngsters possess the skills and a composure to play under pressure. By then they have awareness and an understanding of the game and are ready to be tested. Now the steel of real competition will hone their skills to new levels. Some countries have nurtured players in this fashion for decades and the results speak for themselves. Look at Germany, Denmark and Holland, especially the latter two nations, both small in population and yet produce top class players on a consistent basis. They care about educating players first and winning second. They know when to win and when to learn. These countries rarely win any tournament up and past the mid-teens but when they come of age, around 18; they are ready to vote and ready to compete. This long term learning attitude is the foundation stone that crates a playing excellence of the highest standard. They then go on to win real trophies- EURO '92 and '96, European Champions League and a few World Cups here and there.

One of our problems in youth sports is that winning and losing gets twisted to the point where they acquire a strange status. Winning is equated as a form of excellence and losing is treated like a social disease. I feel players need to lose about 20 to 25% of their games in order to learn. In fact, there's nothing wrong with losing if you have given of your best. With a positive approach, the loss can become a "learning win" as players know what to do to improve, plus they can learn from their opponent's play. You can only learn to fight when things go wrong. Remember the purpose is to educate and that involves dealing with setbacks. They need to learn to put a game right and to deal with reversals, bad days, rotten pitches and other obstacles that lurk to test a player's spirit and tenacity. Too often parents want "pain free learning experiences" to quote Alice Ann Wilber of William Smith College. Being dropped or losing is treated as someone else's fault, often the coach is first in line to be credited with the failure. Because of these isolated, protective reactions from parents, they block the opportunity of their teenager dealing with a setback and so learning to rebound, making that child a stronger, more independent person. If they are real players, they will firth their way back into the line-up and prove everyone wrong. What's wrong with a youngster learning to face up to such adversity? Often it is short term pain followed by personal growth whereas in later life it maybe another matter on a far more important issue. It did not stop Michael Jordan after he was dropped from his high school team. He had this unconquerable spirit to never give up the good fight. If that is the result of being dropped, I think more players should try it!

We live in a "quick fix society" and this is very evident in youth sports as trophies are dished out to nearly anyone and for any reason. I think the winners are the ones who were lucky enough not to win an award as they are the minority, therefore special! The trophies are as cheap as their extrinsic value as they tend to follow the journey of mantel-piece, bedroom, closet, and basement to trash can. This because even more noticeable after attending a youth soccer banquet some years ago. A youngster was asked, "How many trophies have you won?" The boy looked at his fingers to count and turned to his dad, the parent being his personal computer, "dad, how many?" "I, don't know, maybe 7, maybe 9" replied the dad. "Tell me about your 5<sup>th</sup> Trophy? Came the next question and again the boy looked for parental advice and again no real answer. "Why win a cup if it doesn't mean anything to you?" Back came a silent replay the boy shrugged his shoulders stating "I don't know" His non answer probably speaks the truth of the vast majority of young so-called winners. They have won a trophy but lost an experience. Experience is collecting

knowledge and memory, both are vital learning blocks and yet we devalue them wholesale straight to the trash can. Sadly a cup as some lineage before it finds its rightful resting place.

Too often parents, coaches and uneducated youth groups want to win the wrong things. They prize a \$5.00 trophy over the education of youngsters through a sport. Learning takes time and intellect whereas buying cups and medals takes a phone call and a cup of coffee.

What do we want to win? Simply, the real prizes are fun, getting savvy and skillful in a sport and learning life skills of working hard at helping their team be the best they can be. To make this happen, all adults involved in youth sports should help to create a positive, learning environment. As one child wrote about their ideal school: "It's a place where you are encouraged to be yourself'. They expect the best of you and you feel at home there. It is a place you can always return to in your mind". Teams are no different as you are caring about tomorrow's generation.

GOOD LUCK AND GOOD SOCCER,

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