

LSC Coaching Notes Vol. 3, No. 3 - Dave Gosselin, LSC Coaching Director.

The following article is reprinted from SelfHelp Magazine. Jeff Hoham is a coach at East High School.

Adopt a Winning Philosophy

by Jeffrey G. Hoham

The influence of sports on the daily lives of young people is profound. Often young athletes are admired, perhaps even worshipped, by their peers and a large segment of society. Sports and fitness activities are widely encouraged as healthy for the body, mind, and character. However, when taken to the extreme, "pressure" can quickly replace "participation," and develop into unhealthy, self-destructive behavior in a young person. The emphasis on competition, and most notably, "gamesmanship" in our society has created an obsession with winning. The "FUN" is no longer the driving force behind participation for young athletes, and parents, coaches, teachers, counselors, health/fitness experts, and journalists seem to be at a loss for the solution(s) to this problem.

The AFA (American Footwear Association) recently completed a study of nearly 10,000 student/athletes between the ages of 10-18. When asked to list the ten most important reasons that "I play my best school sport," the respondents overwhelmingly selected "To have fun, as #1, and surprisingly listed "To win" at #10. The study seemed to indicate that winning, the most publicized and pursued goal of sports, is actually a relatively poor motivator for most junior and senior high school athletes.

The study further suggests that the path to excellent performance lies in motivating young people to embrace "self-improvement" and "personal goals" rather than winning. A very powerful message is being sent to the adult world from the hearts and minds of young people across the country, and it needs to be heard and understood.

Success should not be determined solely by the outcome of a contest. The basic problem in this issue of "worthiness" is that athletes learn from parents, coaches, teammates, and the media to gauge their self-worth largely by whether they win or lose. Consequently, participation in sports can be seen as "threatening" to athletes, because they equate their achievement with their self-worth. Winning is important, but it must become secondary to striving to achieve personal goals. Success must be seen in terms of players exceeding their own goals rather than surpassing the performance of others. It's the pursuit of the victory, the dream of achieving the goal more than the goal itself that yields the joy of sports. Many outstanding athletes candidly say that their best memories of sport are not the victories themselves, but the months of preparation, anticipation, and the self-revelation before and during the competition.

Coaches and parents need to adopt a philosophy of "Athletes First, Winning Second." As a coach for nearly a decade in the Lincoln Public Schools, I have often encouraged my student/athletes to emphasize "performance," over winning. I have observed these young people perform at very high levels when they do not feel the "pressure" to win, but instead are concentrating on consistent play, and maximum effort. Young athletes need to understand that they have very little control over the "winning" or "losing" of a contest. It is a principle that is easy to state, but very difficult to achieve. However, if parents and coaches help young people understand and implement this principle, they will do more to help them become better athletes -- and successful adults -- than by any other action. When an athlete understands this principle, they are much more likely to concern themselves with "how they play," rather than "who they play."

Guiding young athletes to develop skills in sports promotes self-esteem because they feel better about themselves as they see themselves develop skills that they didn't have before. Sports also provide a great opportunity, one of the few in this society, to learn to work together as a team. Team sports offer the chance to learn to deal with differences in each other, and these cooperative skills can transfer to other settings in life. When winning is kept in perspective, sport programs produce young people who enjoy sports, who strive for excellence, who dare to risk error in order to learn, and who grow with both praise and constructive criticism. When winning is kept in perspective, there is room for fun in the pursuit of victory -- or more accurately, the pursuit of victory is fun. With proper leadership, athletics produce young people who accept responsibilities, who accept others, and most of all who accept themselves.

Jeff Hoham is a professional English Instructor at Lincoln East High School in Lincoln, Nebraska. He has taught English Literature and Composition for the past ten years. He also coaches Tennis and Soccer.