

Redefining “Winner”

Youth hockey coaches and their parents place a very high value on winning. Families shop for schools or teams in the hope of winning a championship in the belief that winning means more opportunities. Some believe that the end game is “playing on TV in the State Tournament” as one high school coach in Minnesota was quoted in an interview saying that was what he could offer to high school players. The problem with defining success in the win/loss column is that when the pressure ramps up the goal of winning supersedes all of the other important aspects of playing on a team. Short benches, altered rotations for goalies, and a great deal of anxiety within the team will emerge. The unfortunate part of this psychology is that at the end of the season there is only one winner and so many opportunities to help athletes develop life skills often get overlooked. Even with the winning teams, there are often quite a few disgruntled, disillusioned and unhappy parents and players. Winning at all costs does not cure the psychological damage done to players. Wanting to win and trying to win is very important but how a coach goes about it is far more important.

Jim Thompson, founder of the *Positive Coach Alliance*, has changed the discussion from winning to “mastery of a sport”. This approach has a very different frame work that allows for a more mature and beneficial approach to coaching youth and junior hockey. He bases his approach on the many decades of research by human development experts, sports development experts and common sense. A Mastery approach to youth hockey is perfectly designed for the needs of young people as they grow and develop.

Since nearly all youth coaches are volunteers and not trained in sport psychology, Jim has developed tools that are easy to use and apply in any team environment. The principle key for coaches is good communication skills and staying true to your values, beliefs and vision for your players.

As Jim Thompson describes, the problem with a scoreboard definition of a winner is that it involves three key elements; 1) results, 2) comparison with others 3) avoiding mistakes. All three of these are contrary to developing skilled athletes and insuring all players have a quality experience that fosters growth and success.

Another problem with the scoreboard definition of success is that athletes under pressure to win generally have high levels of anxiety which in turn has a negative impact on performance. This is of course the opposite of what coaches want to accomplish but unwittingly they create anxiety and stress by placing the focus in the wrong areas.

Learning to bounce back from failure is a key skill that young players need to learn from their playing days and for life after hockey. Athletes who have learned to rebound from losing tend to be better balanced and more successful in life and business endeavors. Additionally, a recent study by M. Kavussanu and G.C. Roberts found that “ego orientation” in athletes (scoreboard orientation) was related to lower moral functioning,

poor sportsmanship attitudes and a great belief that it is legitimate to engage in actions that might injure an opponent. It would seem that we want our youth players to emerge from their experience in sport as more, rather than less, ethical. The Mastery approach to coaching reinforces this goal.

If your goal as a coach is to help your players become the best they can be, then you will be less inclined to abandon your principals in order to win on the scoreboard.

The Mastery approach has three fundamental areas that are important to successful coaching. They are Effort, Learning, and Mistakes. We will explore each of these three areas in subsequent issues in the months ahead.

. If you want to learn more about redefining winning you can order a copy of *“the Double-Goal Coach”* from www.positivecoach.org.

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