

June 30, 2005 -- **Letter to the Editor**

Some Thoughts on Winning:

The sports pages of the local papers regularly celebrate the championship teams in New Rochelle. Winning makes people feel good, about their community and themselves. It might be worth a moment, however, to consider the cost of some of these victories.

For every champion there is a loser, but the quest for victory, particularly in the various travel sports leagues, often produces more “losers” than we acknowledge. Pages of league guidelines make pronouncements about “promoting a child’s self-esteem”, but at game time, we often “play talent,” and to promote a higher level of competition, put aside the other kids. Some folks say, “kids should learn the true nature of competition.” And by the age of ten, the talent judges have banished many of our children to the bench, right field or at least far away from the real competition.

The anointed few receive the extra coaching, encouragement, attention, and approval from the adults (coaches and parents); the rest are left with minimal attention, neglect or even taunting and humiliation, encouraged to retire to the couch of life as a spectator. Imagine your child going to every practice, working hard and suiting up for every game, only to sit on the bench, except perhaps for a couple of minutes or innings of token participation. The “stars” get to go home and celebrate the victory and the benched child gets to go do what? “I guess I stink” is then followed with a withdrawal from all sports. And parents of the star athletes are pleased to lose the deadwood on the team.

We are left with many children for whom all the “benefits” of team sports are no longer a possibility. The whole opportunity to learn about cooperation, shared goals and the rewards of hard work is set aside in favor of winning. If we as a community think “winning isn’t everything; it’s the only thing,” then we should accept the results and not try to tell our children that the benefits of sports are for everyone. Our children deserve no less than our honesty. But if we really think that winning is only one thing, one part of sports, maybe we had better reconsider this aristocracy of talent. Or maybe we can even reconsider the whole definition of talent. Do diligence, dedication and perseverance play any part? We had better have answers for the many children left behind to ponder what they can still believe in.

What if we really believed that hard work and individual effort have value? Then we would have to work harder ourselves, supporting and creating many more opportunities for kids to succeed instead of merely win. Create more levels of competition on the travel circuit to balance the need to accommodate different levels of skill development. Some communities have taken a hard look at the “building champions” model and changed their approach to “building more travel soccer” by giving kids appropriate levels of competition (based on their skill level), but guaranteeing greater numbers of opportunities. And there are coaches and parents in our city who also have devoted much effort (in the face of opposition) to create sports that give kids more chances for growth, instead of just dividing the world between the have-talents and the have-nots. In the classroom we know how difficult it is to respect every child’s individual rate of development and provide them with equal opportunity along the way. Do we believe that good teaching or good

coaching is wasted on the child with less obvious talents?

In New Rochelle, for the past 19 years, Coach Walter Brown with his dedicated, skilled staff and the committed parents of the Remington Flyers Track Club have managed to do a very hard thing. They have acted on the belief that every child on the team who puts in the work and suits up for competition deserves the same attention, the same level of coaching. The national record holder and the less obviously gifted athlete are treated with equal care and concern. Personal growth along with shared responsibility really matter in practice and at the meets. Teach the tools of achievement and success, and leave winning to take care of itself.

While few, if any, of our children will be professional ball players or Olympic athletes, they all will be professional human beings who must strive to build a good life and feel some sense of achievement. Can we consider the benefits to everyone of creating more players instead of more spectators? Shouldn't we leave the judgment on talent until later down the road, and try to give the kids a little more help and time to learn along the way?

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