

A LINE ON LIFE

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Makings of a Winner *

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Interest in the Olympics is at a fever pitch. Around the world, people are turning their attention to athletics. Beside basic skills and athletic ability, what factors determine who wins? What psychological factors contribute to being a good or an outstanding athlete?

For the last few decades, psychologists have been studying top athletes and children in competitive athletics. Among other things, they have found that goals in sports are related to winning. The prevalent "*winner-takes-all*" philosophy of sports emphasizes **ego-oriented goals**. These goals emphasize *winning*.

However, **task-oriented goals** emphasize *mastery* of the task. The combination of these goals affects performance in sports. Teachers, parents and coaches can foster conditions that can change goals, especially with children. The following conditions breed ego-oriented goals.

- Coaches harshly evaluate mistakes.
- Most attention and recognition is given to star players.
- Beside beating a competitor, rivalry is emphasized among fellow players.

Task orientation is encouraged by different conditions.

- Coaches praise effort and skill rather than merely winning.
- Athletes are challenged to improve their techniques.
- Even though there are differences in ability, emphasis is placed on the role of each participant.

Those children who develop high task orientation tend to "*enjoy learning more, stick with school longer and perform better than ego-oriented people.*" Especially when children lose confidence in their athletic ability, ego-orientation is linked with less success in school. Before 12 years of age, children are typically task oriented. They equate trying harder with success. After 12 years of age, they begin to realize that effort does not always lead to ability. In an ego-oriented environment, they start to view success as winning. If they don't win, they drop out. Between 12-17 years old, 90% of children drop out of sports.

**Rather than, "*Did I win?*",
athletes will be happier and persist more,
if they ask themselves, "*Am I getting better?*"**

Some psychologists believe that accentuating winning while minimizing attention to the task itself causes this high dropout rate. When coaching is more task-focused, "*children enjoy the sport more, extract more satisfaction from their play, want to practice more and view sports more as a lifelong activity....*" In

contrast, ego-oriented athletes at all levels are "*emotionally fragile*." They are more adversely affected by a slump, a loss or an injury. Their fear of losing causes much stress and anxiety.

However, at elite levels of sports, athletes usually rate high in *both* orientations. In actual competition, when winning is important, they use their ego-orientation. In practice, they become more task oriented. (Task-oriented athletes like practice, but ego-oriented athletes don't.) Athletes need to find a balance between these two orientations.

Another factor is very important in athletics. Do the athletes enjoy playing and practicing their sport? In other words, is it **fun**? Psychologist Tara Scanlan (UCLA) surveyed over 2,000 children who participated in sports and interviewed dozens of elite athletes to see what kept them committed to their sport. According to Scanlan,

"Enjoyment... keeps people motivated, creates commitment and keeps them participating."

Scanlan came to this conclusion while exploring stress after competition. Whether it was team or individual sports, Scanlan found that most of the stress was caused by *losing*. However, if athletes or children have fun while participating, it reduced this stress. With younger children, enjoyment does not have to include winning. Scanlan's survey indicated that winning was the *least* important factor of children's enjoyment of the activity. In contrast, it is part of the enjoyment for most elite athletes.

There are certain "*fun factors*" that are shared by children and elite athletes. Both groups enjoyed "*learning and mastering skills and improving performance*." Working with peers contributed to enjoyment for most participants. Receiving praise from coaches and parents is another source of enjoyment. Whether you win or not, it is good to know that significant others are proud of you. Unfortunately, children (and elite athletes) are less likely to receive praise, if they do not win.

If you want your children to participate in sports – or any other activity – find out what makes it fun for them. Try to include these fun factors whenever possible. Praise their efforts and improvement, whether they win or not. Not only will your children get more fun and satisfaction from participating in sports, you will too. In this way, you can help to create an athletic environment where everyone wins.

* Adapted from Beth Azar's "Top athletes focus on tasks, not trophies" and "Dedication wanes when the fun ends," [*APA Monitor*](#), July, 1996, pages 21-22.