

Putting competition, development and winning in its rightful place!

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I need to make one thing perfectly clear here as I do at all of our presentations to clubs, coaches and parents that I am not a happy clappy, laissez-faire parent who does not value winning and competition.

For those people who know me as a player and a coach, winning was always important to me and remains so, and when it comes to my children I want them to be as successful as they possibly can be.

Both of my children are incredibly competitive, not learnt from me or the environments that I have created but very much because like most other children, they naturally like to compete. So why is it that we get into such a muddle in children's sport when it comes to explaining winning and competition?

Winning, competition and development do not need to be mutually exclusive. Managed correctly and creatively environments can be created where all three can work alongside each other successfully.

Why is it that as soon as we go down the road that winning is not the number one priority that we immediately alienate a large part of the population?

Well this becomes because we have not done enough to inform and support parents or coaches on their role within their child's sporting experience. Many are merely copying what they see on the TV and behaving in a way that they believe is the right way to support their child or their players.

History tells us that winning and success at a young age has very little bearing on what may happen in the future so why as adults do so many of us behave in a way that suggests it is our number one priority?

When we do our parents presentations, part of our talk asks parents to write on a post it note what they want their child to get from their sporting experience? You will be surprised to know that being an Olympian, a professional sportsman or winning on a regular basis very rarely feature.

What does feature heavily however is they would like their children to be well mannered, work hard, show respect, get on well with others and be healthy young people.

We encourage parents to think if their behaviours when it comes to matches and competition, focus and celebrate the traits that they have written down enough?

The reality is no, because for all of our good intentions when competition kicks in and our child is out there playing, winning seems to take over everything else.

We often write about and joke that the two most popular questions asked by sporting parents are 'did you win and did you score?' the child replies no to both of those answers and that is end of conversation for another week..... if we could find ways of asking questions that allow reflection and to celebrate those positive character traits that we have asked for in the post it notes above then we can start to move winning and competition to its rightful place.

We know when children are asked about why they play sport, that winning and playing in tournaments often rank much lower than they would if the same question was asked to adults. Perhaps we should look seriously at this and question our own success criteria?

For those of you that worry that winning should be everything or that your child can never expect to

reach the top without such competition, then I have got a few stories for you.

There is a small town called Norwich USA that has placed at least one of its own on almost every United States Winter Olympics team since 1984.

In all, Norwich, with its population of roughly 3,000, has produced 11 Olympians — including two Summer Games participants — who have come home with three medals, including one gold.

It is a town that collectively raises its children. It is an approach that stresses participation over prowess, a generosity of spirit over a hoarding of resources and sportsmanship over one-upmanship.

Norwich has sent its kids to the Olympics while largely rejecting the hypercompetitive joy-wringing culture of today's achievement-oriented parents. In Norwich, kids don't specialise in a single sport, and they even root for their rivals.

The town's collective philosophy is that youth sports exist to develop a lasting love for physical activity and the outdoors, life skills and friendships that last forever.

In Norwich, it's not that parents don't want their children to be successful. They definitely do. It's just that they are encouraging them to cultivate skills that will serve them in the long run and no matter where their children end up win, lose or draw, it will have just been part of a journey towards a successful life.

The Norwegian Winter Olympic team hold a similar philosophy yet rank so highly when it comes to medal time. The idea involves encouraging children to play sports without letting them keep score or count who's winning and losing until they reach the age of 13.

And after the idea of competition is introduced, the focus remains on having fun and socialising remains strong – even among Norway's top Olympic athletes.

In Iceland the best coaches coach the youngest players and clubs are judged on how many people they continue to keep participating in sport. They have worked out that the more players they have continuing to play into adulthood, the more chance they are likely to find their top athletes. Again, the main focus is on skill development, participation and not on trophies won or league tables.

The national side and many of its top players are now in top clubs scattered around Europe suggesting that none of them have missed out using such an approach, whilst their national side for their population have exceeded all expectations by qualifying for the European Championships and the World Cup.

In countries like Belgium, in football, up to under 11, they have eliminated competitions. The children just go to festivals every weekend. Even when they go to these festivals, they don't even play with their own team mates. They mix the teams and then they play the games. Belgium football is doing really well with this system and they are producing a lot of talent because they are not losing anybody. All their kids want to keep playing.

It is a system that helps children to compete but the winning and the losing and the league tables are secondary at that age. But it is a difficult path because parents are used to it, coaches are used to it.

I am not asking you as parents not to value and enjoy winning, not to enjoy tournaments or not to encourage your children to strive to be the best that they can be as well as allowing them to be competitive. **All I am asking and I have had to really work at this, is just take a step back and think to yourself, do I have winning and competition in its rightful place?**

There is nothing wrong with competition, but competition has to be suitable for the right age and stage of development of your children. **Competing means 'striving for your best'.**

Children like competing, but if that becomes the emphasis for everything, we know it takes away from their motivation quite substantially. None of us as parents or coaches would want or should be responsible for that.

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