

Is Winning All That Matters?

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Walk into many high school gyms and you will find championship banners lining the walls. In the lobbies, you will probably walk past trophy cases packed with the latest hardware representing league and regional accomplishments. Winning teams garner attention from the media and definitely become a source of community pride. But is winning the only thing that matters – is it the all-everything in high school athletics?

In the late '70s and early '80s, our girls lacrosse team won 103 consecutive games and this is considered the unofficial national record. During the 2007 season, Mt. Hebron High School, also located in Maryland, challenged this record, but lost a match that would have pushed it beyond our standard. While some believe Mt. Hebron played a tougher schedule, it would be impossible to compare the results because the games were played in different decades and eras.

In part fueled by the notoriety and coverage of Mt. Herbron's run, a few of our parents expressed their disapproval with our program. It wasn't that we didn't win any games. As a matter of fact, we finished the season with a 9-4 record and advanced to the final game of the regional championship. But this wasn't good enough for these few misguided parents. In their eyes, we weren't as dominant as Mt. Hebron and winning was all that mattered.

How sad! To believe that our team wasn't successful because it didn't match a winning streak established in another era. After all, 25 or more years had passed since the record had been set. As a result of this unrealistic expectation, a few parents actually pressed to have our coaching staff fired. Not that this is the only example that can be offered illustrating the over-emphasis of winning, but it does pose the question of how we measure success in high school athletics.

In our setting, we use the following three standards to determine if we have had a successful season:

1. Are the athletes learning and improving throughout the season? While this effort should include sport-specific skills and strategies, it should also involve lifelong lessons and qualities. The ability to work with others for a common goal, sacrificing individual goals for the welfare and betterment of the team, and the ability to persevere are just a few that should occur. If this objective is accomplished, our teams have had a successful season regardless of the final record.
2. Have the athletes had a good, memorable and enjoyable experience? In numerous national studies, it has been clearly identified that the No. 1 reason young people participate in athletics is to have fun. This does not mean that teams should abandon working hard and preparing to win, because they should. However, athletes should also enjoy the challenges of competition, the camaraderie with fellow athletes and their coaches, sharing team activities, and developing lifelong positive memories.
3. Do the athletes and teams represent your school in a positive fashion? Obviously, this means that they should exhibit good sportsmanship and respect for everyone involved in athletic competition – opponents, coaches, officials and fans. It also means that the athletes are good citizens and serve as positive role models and ambassadors for your school.

A perfect example occurred a few years ago. Our girls soccer team resoundingly met all three of these goals and along the way it also won the state championship. The key words were “along the way,” because winning the championship came after accomplishing the three stated goals for all our teams.

These three goals also become important guidelines in our hiring process for new coaches and the evaluation effort of our existing staff. It is important philosophically that our coaches not only understand our position, but also buy into our goals and approach.

During the early phase of one interview, the candidate wanted to impress and stated, “I’m here to win a state championship for you.” Needless to say, the red flag immediately arose. This isn’t what we wanted to hear. On the contrary, we were hopeful that the answer would include concrete examples of what would be done to help our young people have the best possible experience by participating in our athletic program. That never came through and we chose another candidate who more closely embraced our expectations.

However, this is not to say that we shouldn’t also try to win, because we should. Our teams and coaches should work hard, prepare and strive to win games. The daily effort, discipline and working toward a common goal is certainly a worthy outcome.

“It’s just that winning isn’t the only barometer of success.”

In a few high-profile sports and in some areas of the country, stating that winning may not be the most important aspect of high school athletics may be a tough sell. But in educationally based athletics, other outcomes are just as important and valuable. Winning is not all that matters.