

Be a Winner in Sports

Under the right circumstances, you and sports can be a dynamic combination. The most obvious contribution is to your physical development—improving balance, coordination and cardiovascular health. With a little bit of luck, an active teen will grow up to be an active adult.

Sports can also contribute to your mental development since mastering athletic skills can build confidence and self-esteem. Sports develop a sense of teamwork and cooperation and teach discipline and responsibility. The lesson learned is that achievement in sports, like success in life, requires commitment and hard work.

Unfortunately, changes in our society during the past 15 years have created conditions that occasionally make sports too stressful in today's world. It's called the Vince Lombardi ethic: "Winning is not everything; it is the only thing." Years ago, instead people would say "it is not whether you win or lose, but how you play the game that counts." Living up to the standards of that statement was supposed to help you better understand the ideas of friendship, teamwork, winning and losing.

You participate in sports because you enjoy it, but some adults want you to play sports for many other reasons—and that is where the trouble starts. Parents crowd the sidelines and fill the stands to cheer for their children. More often they also yell at the coaches, officials and you. Grown-up officials blow their whistles with authority and often take the game away from the players.

Parents and coaches should agree on realistic goals, such as beating your own record or improving some aspect of the game, rather than winning at all costs. This doesn't mean you shouldn't be encouraged to win—but if you have given it your all, you can lose and still be successful.

Below is a philosophy of winning. Keep these statements in mind while you're training and competing.

- Winning is not the most important objective and losing is not a sign of failure.
- Neither success nor failure depends on the outcome of a contest or on a won-lost record.
- Success is related to effort – you're never a "loser" if you have given it your best.

What can you do to make sure you have fun playing sports? Begin by asking: "How did I play today?" or "Did I have fun?" rather than dwelling on "Who won?"

Probably the most important thing you can do is to ensure you have a good coach. The right coach can make sports exposure a good one, but the wrong one can ruin it—perhaps turning you off to sports for good. Most youth coaches are just parents who give up their own time to coach the team. People can find out about a coach by talking to the parents of the coach's previous teams. You'll also want to observe a practice and talk to the coach.

In addition, recognize when organized sports are no longer fun. Studies have shown that one-third of all those participating in organized sports drop out each year, and about 80 percent drop out for good between the ages of 12 and 16. This statistic alone should tell us that most are not having fun playing sports. Don't consider yourself a failure if you decide to stop playing. Try to find another interest or activity to take its place. There is nothing wrong with giving up baseball and taking up the saxophone.

Perhaps the best thing a young athlete can do is to help fit the triumph and frustration of athletics into a balanced healthy life. It's really not that important how many medals and trophies you bring home. You're a person first and an athlete second. Win or lose, know that it's not the score that counts, but the fun!