

How to Handle Winning and Losing

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If someone asked you if playing soccer is about wins and losses, do you know how you would answer? I asked this question of many of our parent members and many who responded felt that it was more important to focus on what happens during the 90 minutes of play rather than the outcome. Parents who embrace this philosophy can be a strong asset to our kids who play. After all, as parents, how we handle the post game discussion can play a large role in how our children view their performance and themselves.

You may or may not be aware that in the past our membership voted that our players on the U9 & U10 Developmental Travel teams need not have all of the elements of the competitive program that the older players have. For de-emphasizing wins and losses at the U9 & U10 level, I commend the membership of Minnesota Youth Soccer Association, including its 143 clubs. The goal of this initiative has been to keep the focus on the game and performance rather than results. To achieve this, no scores are kept, there are no league winners and there is no state tournament for these age groups. This allows our younger players to attribute their success or loss to things that they can control instead of circumstances beyond it. As a result, these young players have the unique opportunity to become intrinsically motivated, working to improve skills and play, through practice and effort without the added pressure of trying to improve stats and rankings.

Player development is a slow, long-term process with the goal of building the skills and know-how necessary to be successful later on. Sometimes when experienced coaches are working towards player development and building their team, the decisions they make might differ from those that the untrained person or less-seasoned coach would make. There is a greater purpose. On the field, the coach may ask that the goalkeeper not to punt the ball, but instead play on the ground forcing the team to learn how to play out of the back and thereby challenging all of the players to learn the particular role they each play. In keeping with this philosophy, U.S. Soccer Best Practices, the coaching manual published by U.S. Soccer, promotes “Focusing on the process and performance rather than the outcome, but be prepared for the possibility that your team may lose some games in the short term with this approach. Keep in mind that it is actually easier to win games with teams that are ‘organized,’ but lack skill. Placing the more physically mature players down the middle of the field and just asking players to kick it down the middle or only allowing players to specialize at one position may lead to more victories. This approach, however, does not effectively teach the players the game and prepare them to continue on in the sport. Instead, a skillful approach to playing soccer should be emphasized, even though this may result in conceding goals or losing games in the short term. During the learning process, ball control and passing can lead to more costly mistakes. At the same time, the coach can manipulate the level and variety of the competition to ensure that players and teams are being given the opportunity to win and to lose games. Valuable lessons can be learned in both scenarios. In the end, it is still the responsibility of the coach and the parents to manage how competition is addressed and managed with the players.”

Think about this... in fact, take a moment to reread the previous paragraph and really digest what it is telling us. What I get from this is that when development and growth are the end goals, there will most definitely be growing pains. By emphasizing the game and not the results for our U9 and U10 players, these are surely growing pains that some of our youngest members may feel. Let's face it, losses can be disappointing, but when parents come at it from the same angle as the coach, they can help their child see the value in the game, the skills learned, and the gains made in spite of the loss. Making an effort to understand what the coach is doing during the competition is important and will ensure that parents are on the same page helping and not hindering their child's development.

For the parent who struggles with how to handle these situations, I encourage you to discuss these situations the same as you would a test at school. I think I can speak for most of us when I say that at those times our children come to us with less than stellar grades and we know that they truly applied themselves, we wouldn't berate them for failed efforts, but instead we would encourage them for working

so hard and would help them to see what they did right. And many of us would want to see how we could help them be more successful in the next round. This is exactly how we should handle the off-field discussion following a disappointing game.

This isn't about dumbing it down for our younger players. It's not that kids at the U9 and U10 level don't understand winning and losing or the impact of tournament play and teams' records, in fact, it's the exact opposite. The current model employed by MYSA for these age groups is in place to allow them to have fun and grow as players without putting too much emphasis on results. This dimension of young player development could be lost if we were to make the U9 & U10 groups a model of the older age groups, and as the State Director of Coaching, I hope we can continue to look beyond the wins and losses focusing on the bigger picture. And for those of us working with our older youth, let's keep in mind that this could be a valuable message worth carrying over into our competitive age groups so that the future of our players and their growth as individuals remains paramount to our mission.

Here's what our parents had to share on winning and losing:

"I think it starts with the parents and not the coach. Our philosophy is quite simple: we praise our children for their effort (trying hard) and do not focus on winning or losing. It does not matter if it is school, sports, church, etc. we want our children to try and focus on being their best, trying hard, giving great effort and not to focus on the outcome. In soccer or other team sports I like to see my daughter with red cheeks and I can tell, she can tell, her coach can tell, and most importantly her teammates know if she was trying her best."

"As parents we always stay positive no matter what. If there is a loss, we give the kids time to process and then discuss what they think have gone better in the game. We really try to have the kids discuss what their personal roll was in the game and not let them blame other players. We also discuss how winning isn't everything and that what is learned by either a win or loss is what is important. Our kids have been taught to stay positive with their teammates no matter the outcome. Yelling and screaming at the kids and coaches does nothing except raise blood pressure and the kids' anxiety!"

"Win or lose I have found it best to let the kid direct any conversation....or silence. They know everything that happened in the game good and bad so it is NEVER useful to point out the bloopers. Even praise needs to be given carefully because the kid might be focused on a blooper. Let them decide when to talk. I was given advice some time ago that it is best to not discuss the game in the car on the way home unless the kid wants to and have found this to be good advice. It is much easier to talk after the heat of the battle has subsided. Winning and losing are not important....ever. I have in 12 years of soccer never met anyone who will make their living playing soccer, but everyone can benefit from being on both sides of the win. That's not restricted to soccer either."

"The key is balance, sometimes you win sometimes you lose it's that simple. It is important to play your best game and walk off the field knowing that you personally gave it everything, and helped to elevate the performance of the team collectively. Play hard, play fair, have fun, be safe. It's fortunate in a funny way that when he started playing, they rarely won...for years, focusing on skills - not winning. It helped him cope. Now that his team wins more often, loses some, he handles it well...so do I."

Thank you to all of those parents that responded to my question candidly sharing your strategies and ideas on how to best deal with this scenario that takes place on soccer fields all across the state and indeed throughout the country.