

LEARNING FROM LOSING

My son once had a so-called coach who espoused that the only thing you learn from losing is how to be a loser. My son no longer plays for that – since there are no names used here, I will use this term – idiot.

If you have involved your child in athletics to imbed the principles of winning at all costs, then you have chosen both the wrong avenue and the wrong philosophy, and you are most certainly not a fan of the Philadelphia professional sports teams, who lose during crunch time almost every year.

The old saying in the NFL goes that on any given Sunday, any team can beat any team, and that is 100 percent true. That trickles down into the college, high school and youth ranks as well. Take a moment off mentally, take a week off of focused preparation, and the price will surely be paid on game day. Parents who shop their child around because they want them to play for a winning program or a coach whose team is a proven winner are shopping their children for the wrong reasons. If parents are going to be shopping their children around in sports, it should be in the pursuit of coaches who serve as educators, who can teach their children the skills of a particular sport while keeping wins and losses in perspective.

One of the perks of my job as a sports writer is that I have been able to mingle with coaches and athletes at every level, from T-ball through Super Bowl champions, from high school to Olympic champions. If a coach cannot teach a lesson from a loss, then that coach is missing out on teaching some of life's most important lessons. Those coaches are acting as Don King, leading Mike Tyson down a path of destruction while developing no skill set to deal with adversity. When Buster Douglass knocked out the previously undefeated Tyson, it marked the end of an era for a fighter ill-prepared to face failure. It had never been an option.

Some of the most memorable events I have written about for the newspaper dealt with people coming up short at crunch time. Perhaps the biggest such moment was watching former Lehigh University assistant coach Kerry McCoy lose one match before the medals round at the 2004 Athens Olympics. McCoy had set his retirement for the end of the Games, and after he lost the overtime bout using something superfluous called “the clinch rule”, a situation that is no longer used by the way, he sprinted off the mat in total disappointment. Yet, less than five minutes later, he faced the media with candor and wisdom, declaring an Olympic medal must not have been in God's plan for him. McCoy, one of the classiest athletes you'd ever want to meet, is now the head coach at Stanford University.

Wrestling is one of those sports that helps teach the value of losing. It's one-on-one, and someone has to lose: how the loser responds to that loss is an indication of character or character flaw. I have shivered at championship tournaments like district, regional and state competitions when a favored wrestler loses early, then bombs out by losing in the very next round after a lackluster effort. Some people will explain that a wrestler has put everything into winning that championship, and when that goal is lost, so is the effort. To me, that's the wrong view. That

same wrestler needs to face the reality of his situation and finish to the best of his ability. Former Parkland and Lehigh University wrestler Jon Trengue once dreamed of being a four-time NCAA champion. He made the finals twice despite a severe eye injury that could have cost him his eyesight. His senior year is documented in the independent film “Veritas: The Jon Trengue Story”, which is debuting in this area at the South Side Film Festival in Bethlehem. Trengue lost in the semifinals his senior year, and when probably everyone and his brother would have forgiven him for “bombing out” out and losing his next match, Trengue won multiple matches to finish third, the highest place he could earn after the semifinal loss, and he won each match in dominating fashion. Trengue may have learned he did not like losing, but he also learned not to quit. He had coaches help him with that along the way, from John Toggas, his high school coach, to Greg Strobel, his college coach, to McCoy, his friend and sometime workout partner. Bethlehem Catholic’s Ziad Haddad, who will be a senior in the fall, lost in the PIAA Class 2A Wrestling finals. Haddad faced numerous members of the media within minutes of losing, and instead of screaming in anguish or throwing a fit of temper, he fought back tears and dedicated himself to making it back to the finals with a better result this coming season.

Losing also teaches something else: acknowledging the talents of your opponent. Athletic competition is not war. It’s a game played between two teams or two individuals. Two seasons ago, Northern Lehigh’s Scott Snyder went undefeated into the state wrestling finals, where he was tossed around like a rag doll in a loss by major decision. Twice during the match, he bravely fought to avoid being pinned. He willed his shoulders to stay off the mat. Afterwards, almost unaffected by the loss, he marveled at how the other wrestler dominated him, acknowledging the worthiness of his opponent. It’s hard to identify which I admired more, his acknowledgement or his refusal to be pinned, but both speak to the characteristics taught to him by his parents and his coach, Todd Herzog. Lastly, like Haddad learned, losing should help someone refocus on what went wrong so they can work on making it better the next time. Such is the lesson learned by Trexlertown’s Marty Nothstein, who lost in the gold medal final of the match sprint in cycling at the 1996 Atlanta Olympics. He dedicated himself to making sure that did not happen again, and four years later, he claimed the gold medal at the 2000 Sydney Olympics.

These are professional and high school athletes discussed here, but the lesson is true all the way down to the youth level, and needs to be reinforced by youth coaches. Losing teaches what went wrong, and the coach needs to show how it can be corrected, how to avoid the same mistakes the next time. If a coach tells your child the only thing losing teaches is losing, start shopping for a new coach.

- Gary Blockus