

By Cliff Suttle

What does it mean to be a “Winner?” We throw the term “Winner” around freely and without a care, but what does the term mean? Is Micheal Jordan a winner? Is Tiger Woods a winner? How about someone you’ve never heard of, getting up and walking across the room? Could walking across a room make someone a winner? Most people would agree that Micheal and Tiger are winners, but what about that guy walking across the room? Could the simple act of crossing a room from one chair to another make you a winner? Mr. Jodan won the NBA (National Basketball Associate) title three times. Mr. Woods is one of the greatest golfers to ever play the game. They’re winners, but how could I possibly include that room crosser in the same paragraph as these proven power houses?

Before you answer my question, or start thinking I’m crazy, perhaps you should know that the unknown gentleman I’m discussing has Cerebral Palsy. It’s hard for this man to even stand up. Today, for the first time in a long time, he managed to walk all the way across the room unassisted. So, what do you think now? Did your opinion change after you had more details? This man didn’t win the NBA Championship or Golf’s Grand Slam, but was he a winner today? He applied effort, ability, and determination to achieve something that, for him, was important. No one is going to write it up in the newspaper, create a television show about it, and he certainly won’t get a Nike shoe contract from the event, but how does he feel about what he accomplished? How do you feel about what he accomplished? How you feel is really the key.

Life is a funny thing. As soon as we think we understand the world, someone comes along and changes our perspective of the game. Suddenly, what we think we understand, becomes foggy and skewed. As parents, we are constantly forced to reevaluate our perspective about our children. Just when we think we understand them, they throw us a curve. This is especially true when dealing with young athletes. The process for navigating a child’s way to a successful result, can be quite difficult and challenging. We want them to be “Winners”, but what exactly does that mean? Get ready, I’m the guy who wants to change your perspective.

When I was a boy, growing up in Michigan, I had a friend named John who lived on my block. John was twice as big and strong as the rest of my friends. When we played football, his team always won. It took three of us to tackle him. Everyone thought John was great and wished they could be as strong as him. John worked hard at being an athlete. He was on the highschool football, wrestling, and track teams and excelled at all three. After highschool, I didn’t see John for many years. The next time I met him, he had just passed the state bar examine to become a lawyer on his first try, which is a difficult thing to do. He confided in me that he wished he had never bothered playing sports because, “it had been such a waste of time.” Did John win or lose at sports? All his friends thought he was a winner, but what did he think and why? Very interesting questions, and yet the answers just seem to lead to more questions.

So, what is a winner? Someone must have the answer. How about one of the many great

books of knowledge in the world. If you look up the term “Winner,” in the American Heritage English Dictionary, it states, “Someone who wins.” Not very descriptive is it. Let’s take it a step further and look up “Win.” The dictionary defines “Win,” as “to be successful at a contest or venture.” Better, but there is still a lot of vague terms in this definition. What does it mean to be successful? Is coming in first place what it means to be successful? Hmmm . . .

Every two years I’m blessed, like many of us, to watch the Olympic Games. The best athletes from all over the world come together to compete. Where I live in Michigan, I am close enough to Canada, to receive CBC television the Canadian station. I have always found it interesting to watch how different the US and Canadian stations cover the sporting events. On the US channel I watch an American athlete miss the gold medal by two tenths of a second. The commentator walks up to this person and says, “Wow, you must be really disappointed . . .” Disappointed?!? For being the second best in the entire world? How many of us can say that we are the second best at anything in just our city or state? This athlete is second best in the entire world, and yet we are saying he lost and should be “disappointed.” Our children watch shows like this everyday. What message is being sent to these young impressionable minds? Flipping over to the Canadian station, we find their commentator congratulating a Canadian athlete who just placed 17th. The Canadian athlete was smiling, the US athlete was not. Who is the winner here? The American? The Canadian? The commentators? The person who won the gold medal? Or, is it a matter of perspective.

Being a winner is all about perspective. You see, the dictionary was right when it couldn’t tell you what you had to do to win. Only your children can tell themselves what it means to win. Not you. Not their coaches. Not their siblings. Not their classmates. Only your child athlete can tell him/herself what it means to win, and hence, be a winner. Remember that the opposite to being a winner, is to be a loser. We may not have figured out what winner means yet, but we certainly know what a loser is. The fact is, if you play sports you will lose at some point. Only a hand full of people in the entire world can say they retired from their chosen sport as world champion. Keep in mind that for every champion there are hundreds, if not thousands, of people who didn’t make it that far or even got close. If we have to be #1 to win, then we live on a planet of losers. According to the Professional Golf Association (PGA), there are 25 million amateur golfers. Of this group only 27 thousand belong to the PGA. Less than 1000 are touring professionals and there are less than 50 top level champions. That is only two one thousandths of one percent (0.0002 %) of the golfing population. If you have to be invited to the Masters golf tournament to be a winner, then winners are sure in short supply.

Playing sports is a great thing for a young person. A successful sports experience can teach them so much about themselves, life, dealing with others, and being successful. A poor sports experience can also hurt, humiliate and destroy their self esteem and self worth. Notice I used the term “Successful Sports Experience.” Remember that the dictionary told us that to “Win” was to be “Successful” at a contest or venture. Winners are successful.

I draw the line in the sand between winning and losing right at being “Successful.” No matter

how good or bad your kids are at sports, if your children walk away feeling good about themselves, what they have accomplished, and what they have learned, they are winners. If your children walks away feeling like they didn't measure up, reliving their mistakes day after day, punishing themselves with "what if," or "if I had only," then they lost. No matter what medals were won, titles were held, or records were broken, if they don't feel good at the end, they've lost. Plain and simple. This is what it is all about, "FEELING SUCCESSFUL."

In the 2002 Winter Olympics, the women's figure skating championship was hotly contested. There were several excellent athletes that could have won the gold medal. Tops on the list of contenders was Michelle Kwan. She was the great American champion who had won several world titles and had a silver medal in the 1998 Winter Games. About the only title she hadn't won was an Olympic gold medal. Everyone expected her to win, including Michelle. The night of the finals arrived and Ms. Kwan, to no one's surprise, was sitting in first place after the first round of skating. She was in the driver's seat. All she had to do was skate clean and the long sought after gold medal was hers. When Ms. Kwan had missed getting the gold medal in the 1998 Olympics, she had been beaten by a very young girl named Tara Lipinski. Tara wasn't suppose to win, but she did. Ms Kwan had spent four long years training hard for a chance to win the gold again in 2002. On the night of the finals, I was sitting in my family room watching the big event on television. Like many people, I was pulling for Kwan. She was the sentimental favorite. When I saw her step onto the ice, I turned to my wife and said, "She is not going to do it." I watched in dismay as I saw her stumble. It was a small mistake in a great performance, but those types of little errors make all the difference in the Olympics. Kwan took the 3rd this time, beaten out by another young U.S. skater, Sarah Hughes, who, like Tara Lipinski, wasn't suppose to win either.

How did I know Kwan would falter? Am I a great judge of skating talent? No, I'm pretty much like many people who only watch figure skating during the Olympics. Am I psychic? Hardly, I usually lose heads or tails guesses in a coin flip all the time. So, what was the key that made me question Kwan's ability to pull off a clean performance? It was the look on her face during warm ups. She didn't look like someone who was ready to win. To me, she looked like someone who was trying desperately not to lose. After the medals were announced, the camera took a picture of Kwan's family in the stands. They looked like she had just died. I thought to myself, "her family never let go of Kwan lose in the 1998 Olympics either." Michelle is a great champion. In my mind one of the greatest skaters who has ever lived. My hope, and prayer, is for her to walk away feeling like the winner, and the great champion I know she is. However, only Michelle can decide this for herself. How many of us have an Olympic medal? I know I don't have one. Ms. Kwan has two, plus enough other competitive irons to fill a large room. Is that enough? It would be for me, but each person must decide for themselves.

So you see, its all about perspective. Its all about the way you view the world, your life, and your accomplishments. Does this mean that I think you should except losing or being less than you can be? No, in fact quite the opposite. Learning to strive, how to win, and how to make your dreams become a reality can only be achieved by trying to win. Giving it everything you have is the key to

sports and life in general. My childhood friend John, who I mention earlier, thought he had lost in sports. He felt like he had wasted his time, because he never made any money at it. I don't think he wasted his time at all. I believe he won and won big. In learning to work hard at being an athlete, he learned to work hard in life. Now, he's a lawyer. Not bad, wouldn't you say? I think the things he took with him from sports made him a winner. I have not talked to John in a long time, but I hope that looking back, he can see what a winner he was and still is.

Let me share with you a day I lost. I was playing in the second round of a semi-pro tennis tournament. I was up against a man everyone nicknamed the "Rabbit." I was much taller and more powerful than he was. I had a big, over powering serve. I figured that his lack of reach would allow me to crush him with my serve. I got to served first in the match. I pounded the ball and charged to the net. He barely got his racquet on it and made a poor return. I smashed the ball to the other side of the court as hard as I could. No man alive should have been able to get to that ball. Yet he ran it down and blew it past me like it was fired out of a cannon. I watched it crash into the fence behind me and thought, "I'm in trouble." That was the best I had and he was better. The Rabbit went on to beat me 6-1, 6-1 and it really wasn't as close as the score made it seem. After the match I chatted with this nemesis who had just crushed me into the pavement. As it turned out, he was at the next rung on the tournament ladder. He was playing some professional tournaments and some semi-pro tournaments. In his last tournament, he had played Rod Laver. If that name isn't familiar to you, Rod Laver was one of the best tennis players in the world back in his day and won three tennis grand slams. But, Laver's day had passed. He was 49 years old and only played one tournament a year at this point. Laver was hardly in championship form anymore. My opponent told me that Rod Laver have beaten him 6-1, 6-1. At that moment it dawned on me that I was never going to be that good. I went home, threw my racquets in the closet, and there they sat, unused, for five years. That day, I was a loser and not because the "Rabbit" beat me.

That was a long time ago. Since then, I have switched sports, won many championships, and more importantly walked away with a good feeling about what I had done and the contribution I made to the sport. Back then, I didn't have the life skills to see what I had accomplished in tennis. All I could see was that I was never going to be "Good Enough." Good enough for whom? My Father maybe? My friends? Perhaps just myself? Looking back I realize now, I was good enough. In my new sport, the ultimate title is the Olympic gold metal. I never even qualified for the Olympic team. I was never really close to #1. Yet, I still feel like I walked away a winner and therefore I did.

In this book, I want to share with you, the parents of athletes, the skills to guide your children to a winning experience in sports. Whether your child is simply playing little league for the fun of it, or striving to become a professional athlete, these skills can be applied to help your child become the best they can, or want to be. I hope you will join me in making your child's experience in sports a great one. Turn your kids into winners both on the court/field/track/pool/etc. and off. Let's make Winning Kids by creating Winning Parents. I hope that this first chapter has already helped you to aid your child, by focusing on your priorities. By thinking about the athlete, your child, and not the score, you have already began to create a more positive, powerful, and winning environment for your

young competitor.

This entire chapter has been about perspective. I want to end this section with an important statement. Your perspective on whether your child is a winner or loser has long term effects on whether your child believes in themselves. Parents are a powerful force in a child's life. Remember that you are reading this book to aid your child. Focus on the child. Help them to become a winner. This is the true and only goal of a Winning Parent. If you had your choice, would you rather raise an unhappy Olympic gold medalist, or a happy, content adult with fond memories of their time in sports.