"Competition" is Not a Dirty Word

by Greig Cronauer (ASCA Newsletter, Volume 2005, Issue 1)

With the growing popularity of youth sports programs over the last few years (especially for ages 8 and younger) the concept of "competition" has taken a beating. Keep in mind the vast majority of these programs are fun and well-run. Often no score is kept and everyone gets to play an equal amount. But we still hear many parents telling the coach or administrators "I don't know if I really want my Suzy competing. She really isn't a very competitive child."

Why is this? If you look at the definition of "competition" you can get different meanings. I checked four different dictionaries and got four different definitions. Let's compare two of them.

This one is from the Random House Dictionary:

com • pete (kom pçt) *v.i.*, -peted, -pet-ing. To strive to outdo another, as for supremacy.
com • pe • ti • tion (kom-pi-tish-ən), *n.* 1. The act or process of competing. A contest for some prize, honor, etc. – com-pet-i-tive, *adj*.

The next is from Webster's Unabridged Dictionary:

com • pete , v.i. ; competed, *pt., pp.;* competing, *ppr.*
[***L.*** competere, to strive together ; ***com-,*** together, and ***petcre***, to seek.]

1. To seek or strive for the same thing as another; to carry on competition or rivalry; to strive in opposition.
2. To enter or participate (in a contest, athletic meet, etc.)

The Random house definition suggests there is no room for anyone who isn't victorious in a competitive event. Who wants to hand a gladiator's mace to an innocent, freckle-faced six-year-old and throw them into the coliseum to do battle?

Webster's seems to be the most accurate. It explains the Latin derivation "to strive with." Note that it says **with**, … not against. A good example of this is an Olympic marathon race where the competitors end up in groups or "packs" that stick together through the major portions of the race. Each competitor feeds off the other and may be able to maintain a faster pace than if they ran alone. This is the essence of "striving with". They may all end up with lifetime bests and each break their country's national record regardless of who crosses the finish line first.

Now that we have read these definitions, do we really think that parents and children go to the dictionary to make sure they have the right grasp of the meaning? Probably not. Usually their perceptions are formed by watching other parents or coaches, spoiled pro athletes, and their own successful teammates. Some are good, some are bad. Some are slightly aggressive and some are extremely pushy. These poor "role models" may think that competition is ….. "Keeping the other guy down" ….. "Keeping the other guy from achieving" ….. "Keeping everyone below or behind you."

Unfortunately the athletes that exhibit this behavior may do very well in the sport and instead of being guided gently toward the proper attitude, are praised for their success at very young ages. What happens then? They continue those same attitudes ….. often encouraged by coaches and parents who justify it with the excuse "Well, …. it's tough and cut-throat in the real world and we might as well prepare them for it."

Although there is nothing wrong with being cleanly aggressive on the playing field … many youngsters are encouraged to take it too far. Or when they do take it too far, they don't have their attitude gently adjusted by parents or coaches who simply like the results too much. By the Webster's definition, these children may grow up lacking the true spirit of sport and competition. Although these children may become successful in their endeavors, chances are that many will become the badgering little league dad, or the mom that only shouts criticism or instruction at their kid from the bleachers. They end up either causing their child to dislike sport or pass on their "skewed" attitude about competition from generation to generation.

So, what can we do to correct this skewed concept of competition? Let's first try to understand where it all starts. I am not a psychologist … but, as a parent of two children and a coach for 25 years, I believe that each child is born with varying degrees of personality traits. As they grow these traits (bold, timid, selfish, aggressive, etc.) naturally come out. Notice that I didn't use the word competitive as a trait. These labels are often and unfairly lumped together. A toddler who aggressively takes toys from others and isn't properly corrected by their parent may grow up to be the adult who does a half-run and brushes past others to get a better place in line at the bank or grocery store. This has nothing to do with competition.

There are many individual personality traits that an athlete may reveal during competition but let's not lump traits like "have to get there first" and "have to get the biggest piece" with "competitive" even though it is easy to do. Many parents have children that love a sport and may be naturally talented but resist joining because they think their child lacks those so-called "necessary" competitive traits. Many more are turned off because they don't want to hang around people (athletes or parents) that exhibit those traits so freely and openly in a negative way. So, what can you do on your end as parent or coach?

The first way is to promote the Webster's definition of "competition. Post the definition on your bulletin board, in your newsletter, or in your registration packet regardless of your sport.

Next, and most important, is … ….. Encourage and promote competition !

That's right,…it's not a dirty word. The athletic event itself is not the problem, it's what is taught and promoted within the event by the parents and coaches that matters. Children need to compete so they can be taught how to compete properly. Mistakes are one of the most powerful teaching opportunities. When the soccer player scores a goal and does an "in your face" to one of the opposing players the coach shouldn't look the other way because it's an uncomfortable situation. Spoil their moment and make the player apologize, to both the player and the referee. And when the child's parent complains that "their team did that same thing to us when they scored earlier. ", have the guts to say "I don't care how unsportsmanlike like they are, we will act properly and professionally."

Coaches and parents of Little League players in a winning dugout should be happy their kids are smiling and proud of their efforts. It's easy for everyone to "bask" in the moment. But they also must realize that, if left unchecked, the following may happen. Out of 16 kids in the dugout saying "We are winning."….

- Eight may progress to saying it loud enough for the other team to hear.
- Six of those may add "We are killing them by 10 runs" …..
- Two may say "We are so much better than they are" …
- And one may even say "They suck."

You have multiple teaching opportunities here. Nip it in the bud and don't let them progress to that last comment. Teach them about "quiet pride". Tell them "You should be proud that you did your best and played well. Now let's go and shake hands." If one player blurts out something negative, say "You're all doing well and I'm proud of you but I'm not proud of you when you put others down."

The more your parents and athletes know about the true meaning of competition the closer we come to the positive "strive with" mentality. In turn, that will lift up all sports to recognize the achievements of the true competitors while exposing those that "compete" with an unhealthy and skewed vision. We, as parents and coaches, have a responsibility to spread this information to younger athletes and parents in their formative years. Coaches often interact with children as much as their parents do and they trust us to teach them about all things "athletic". Don't allow them to develop warped perceptions on their own.

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