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Motivational coaching climate outscores winning for young athletes

“Winning isn’t everything, it’s the only thing.” – former UCLA and Vanderbilt football coach Red Sanders

“I just want to play and have fun.” – a typical 10- to 15-year-old athlete

New research indicates that young athletes find playing for coaches who stress personal improvement, having fun and giving maximum effort is far more important and has a bigger impact on them than a team’s won-loss record.

“In terms of athletes’ ratings of how much fun they had and how much they liked playing for their coach, our results showed that a mastery climate was about 10 times more influential than was the team’s won-loss record,” said Ronald Smith, a University of Washington sport psychologist and co-author of a study published in the current issue of the *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*.

This approach to coaching, known as a mastery motivational climate, contrasts with an ego climate, in which the main goal is winning at all costs and success is defined as being better than other players.

“We also found that a win-at-all-costs ego climate was negatively related to enjoyment and liking the coach,” said Smith.

Co-author Frank Smoll, also a UW sport psychologist added, “Many coaches mistakenly believe that winning is the most important thing to kids. But our research provides convincing evidence that refutes this myth.”

The UW researchers have promoted the mastery approach as a way to foster positive and supportive communication between coaches and athletes and to counteract the negative influences of an ego climate on young athletes. They also have developed a brief training workshop for coaches called the Mastery Approach to Coaching to help enhance the youth sport environment.

“This study replicates research we did with Little League Baseball players back in the 1970s,” said Smoll. “Things haven’t changed because kids’ internal makeup and core values are still the same when it comes to playing sports.”

In the current study, the researchers surveyed 268 boys and girls who participated in basketball programs operated by Seattle Parks and Recreation. The sample was predominantly white and middle class. The study found that players’ attitudes toward their coach were positively associated with the athletes’ perceptions of a mastery-oriented climate and negatively associated with perceptions of an ego climate.

Boys and girls who perceived that their coach created a mastery climate:

- liked playing for their coach more.
- rated their coaches as more knowledgeable about the sport.
- thought their coach was better at teaching kids how to play basketball.
- had a greater desire to play for the coach again the following year.
- enjoyed their team experience more.
- believed that their parents liked the coach more.

Smoll noted that the results held up equally for girls and boys and that winning was relatively unimportant when it comes to youth sports.

Athletes who played on more successful teams, those with better won-loss records, believed that their coach was more knowledgeable about basketball, but a winning team record was far less influential than a mastery climate.

“Youth sport administrators can use our results to teach coaches a powerful lesson: Winning isn’t everything, nor is it the only thing. The key to a positive athletic experience rests solidly on the ways the coach relates to athletes and on the achievement standards that he or she emphasizes,” said Smoll.

“So much of what we do is based on the ideas of what adults think kids need without looking at the kids’ perspectives and what they want.”

Co-authors of the paper are Sean Cumming, a former UW postdoctoral researcher who is now a lecturer in sport and exercise psychology at the University of Bath in England, and Joel Grossbard, a UW psychology doctoral student. The William T. Grant Foundation funded the research.

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