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Why Losing Is Good For Your Hockey Player

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By Sam Weinman - Special to USAHockey.com

In consecutive seasons coaching my son's 10U hockey team, we went from often losing by five or six goals a game to losing just a handful of games all season. Trick question here, but which experience do you think was better for my son's development?

Losing is a complicated concept in sports, and hockey especially. For those of us who coach and who have played the game our entire lives, it's part of our DNA to define success by scoring more goals than the other team then lifting some piece of hardware at season's end. Winning is not only the most satisfying conclusion, it's also the easiest way to show the parents lining up along the glass watching practice that all that money and time invested in hockey has been worthwhile.

But as a hockey coach and dad, I've also learned to embrace the essential role that losing plays in any hockey experience. In fact, I now believe any season without a sufficient amount of adversity might not be as successful as you originally think.

What good can come from coming up short? I'll give you a few examples.

A search for answers: Losing is the ultimate truth serum in that it forces you to identify your weaknesses. In that first 10U season in which my son and his friends were cuffed around by better teams, it was apparent that our skating wasn't at the level of our competition. As coaches, it meant focusing practices on the type of fundamental edgework we originally thought these kids were past. The players bought into it, and by season's end, we were one of the best skating teams in our league. Had we simply won games with ease, I doubt we would have arrived at the same level of focus.

"Even with the kids I coach, I tell them they don't need to accept losing or be OK with it," said U.S. Hockey Hall of Famer Chris Drury, who has coached at both the 8U and 10U level. "But I tell them they can put in a place where they can learn from it."

A sharpening of focus: As a player and a coach, I've been on the wrong end of plenty of games in which we've had to grasp for some silver lining. "Let's try to win this period," we'll say, or even, "Let's just work hard every shift." It might seem like something you say just to make yourself feel better, but it's actually an effective way of steering attention away from results and instead toward a "process." Many sports psychologists suggest that providing yourself a series of small tangible goals is the more effective way of achieving the big ones.

"The people who are really successful, they're not thinking about winning and losing," said sports psychiatrist Dr. Michael Lardon, who works with a number of professional athletes. "They're thinking about the execution of what they can do."

A "growth mindset": My youngest son is an 8U skater, and a pretty good player. He's fast, with good size, and last season it wasn't uncommon for him to score four or five goals in a scrimmage. As you might imagine, visions of taking faceoffs at Madison Square Garden started filling his head. Then this year, we moved into a more competitive division, where there are plenty of kids who skate even better, with much better shots. What could have been a disheartening revelation was instead a worthwhile reminder that he still had a long way to go. To listen to the Stanford University psychology professor Carol Dweck, it was the best possible outcome.

"If parents want to give their children a gift, the best thing they can do is to teach their children to love challenges, be intrigued by mistakes, enjoy effort, and keep on learning," Dweck has written. "That way, their children don't have to be slaves of praise. They will have a lifelong way to build and repair their own confidence."

A lesson for the road ahead: I try to maintain a sunny outlook with the teams I coach, but the reality is, losing is just part of life. Your 10U players might go 32-0, but the next season, at 12U, they might not win six games. And it's not just hockey. In the years ahead, there will be colleges they don't get into, and jobs they don't land. I don't advocate hockey coaches scaring kids into thinking about how hard life can be, but I do recommend them providing the basic tools kids need to cope with disappointment. In some small way, every 3-2 loss is a chance to strengthen that armor of resilience.

"This is an area I speak a great deal about, this whole concept of how you develop resiliency in people," said Dr. Jerry Brodli, a leading child psychologist in Greenwich, Conn. "Over the years, you're going to deal with failure, disaster, and painful events, and you have to learn how to get on with life afterwards. When you talk about how you develop that, sports is a natural because of the idea that you can't always win. That's a given."

Sam Weinman is a youth hockey coach for the Rye (N.Y.) Rangers, an author, and also editor at Golf Digest.

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