

Why Every Kid Should Be A Winner And A Loser

By: David E. Prince, PhD

At some point in recent years it became fashionable among Christians to not keep score at children's sporting events. It is sometimes treated as the proper Christian approach and attitude toward sports. Of course, the all too common, win at all costs, cultural sports idolatry is patently unbiblical and must be rejected among Christians.

But there is some solid ground somewhere between the dad who sits idly by as his son chases butterflies rather than the baseballs in the outfield and the dad who screams at his child between every pitch as if it is the seventh game of the World Series. The Bible is far from silent on sports and athletic competition (Genesis 30:8, 32:24, Psalm 19:3-6, 2 Samuel 2:14, 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, Philippians 3:13-14, Galatians 2:2, Ephesians 6:12, Hebrews 12:1-4). In fact, the Apostle Paul uses the language of sports as one of his three primary metaphors (together with warfare and agriculture) for talking about the Christian life (see 2 Timothy 2:4-7 for all three). All three are physically demanding and require self-control and self-restraint for success.

No doubt Paul was a sports fan (he probably attended the Isthmian games), and it seems he couldn't even think about the spiritual battle of Christian living without pointing to the obvious parallels drawn from his interest in athletic competition. As he does so, it doesn't seem to have ever occurred to Paul that one would ever compete in an athletic contest without trying to win: "Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it" (1 Corinthians 9:24). In fact, he has no desire to "run aimlessly" (1 Corinthians 9:26). For Paul, sports involve agonizing, striving, discipline, self-control, hard work, focus, intensity and a desire for victory -- just like the Christian life.

Paul made it clear there is something far more important than winning a perishable wreath on an athletic field but his point only makes sense in light of the appropriate desire to win on the athletic field (1 Corinthians 9:25). A child who doesn't care if they win in a sporting contest and one who cannot lose without throwing a fit both have troubling character problems that ought to be addressed by Christian parents. Self-centered rage is not a spiritual virtue but neither is weak-willed apathy. Playing sports heartily, as for the Lord (Colossians 3:23), will often be visible in sweat, bruises and occasionally blood.

Though not keeping score in children and youth sports is often passed off as a Christian idea, I think the root of this kind of thinking is found in modern psychological theory and not the Bible. In 1969, Nathaniel Branden published a scholarly article called "The Psychology of Self-Esteem." He argued that feelings of self-esteem were the key to success in life and his notion became the foundational presupposition in education and childrearing for a generation of Americans. When this theory is applied to children, praise is detached from any actual achievement. In "NurtureShock: New Thinking About Children," Po Bronson and Ashley

Merryman conclude that the result of this thinking is a generation of American young adults who feel better about themselves while achieving less.

If feelings of self-esteem are the key to success in life, then every child must be told they are a winner, even when they lose. Or better yet, the thinking goes, don't keep score at all and nobody will ever lose. Everybody is always a winner. But there are grave implications for nurturing children in this type of self-oriented flattery culture where no one ever loses. The Bible keeps going out of the way to kick the legs out from under our misplaced self-esteem and calls us to Christ-esteem. There's a danger in telling children, "All that matters is that you play nice, have fun, and feel good about yourself." The danger is that they might believe it.

Nice little boys and girls who just want to have fun and feel good are not being equipped to give their lives for the sake of the Gospel among unreached people groups or even the difficult people in their own neighborhood. When scoreboards are turned off, as though keeping score is unspiritual, sports are stripped of the core of what makes them such a valuable metaphor for the Christian life. There are eternal winners and losers (Revelation 3:21). We are to count the cost, take up our cross and follow Him because we know what is at stake. At its best, sports provide Christian parents a limited but genuine theater for the examination and cultivation of Christ-honoring characteristics.

Many Christian families are involved in sports activities, and those who act as though nothing matters more than winning a particular game are involved in an idolatrous tragedy. Nevertheless, acting as though winning the game does not matter at all is an idolatry of another sort. A friend once summed up my fears about some families who like sports leagues that don't keep score. He said, "They don't care about the team or the game. They view all the other kids and the coaches simply as props for home movies of their children." Some Christian parents rant about the negative impact of self-important professional athletes who act as though they are more important than the team even while they lobby for their child to be treated as more important than the team.

Our children are not soldiers, and sadly, fewer American kids are growing up farming, but many, if not most, play sports of some kind, and for the sake of the Gospel, we should keep score.