

Stories that help connect sports and life for young athletes.

Life and The Whistle - A Young Athlete's Guide for Effective Living

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SOMETIMES WHEN YOU LOSE, YOU WIN

It would turn out to be the greatest sporting event I was ever a part of, but it certainly did not start out that way. When we arrived in Ledyard, Coach Fleeton left the bus and headed for the Ledyard locker room. When he returned from speaking to their coach about our warm up area, he was as angry as I had ever seen him. "Spitin' mad", as I like to say. It seemed the Ledyard coach had informed Will that he would be playing his starting team for the whole first half regardless of the score. As the coach relayed, no one in the league had challenged them to date and the starters were not getting enough playing time as the scores were getting out of hand early in the games. He assured Will he would put the J.V. squad in after half time. We knew Ledyard was a very good team, but were not aware they were this convinced of that fact.

Now Will had been a starting high school quarterback in Youngstown, Ohio, where football is almost like a religion. This show of disrespect – as unintentional as it may have been – was something Will, on a personal level, could not ignore. He returned to the bus, pointed the team in the direction of our part of the field, and then reiterated to me in very descriptive words what had just happened. After Will had calmed down a bit, we talked it over and felt the team may like to know what their opponents thought of them. I relayed the message to the team as they continued to go through their stretching regimen. Will and I had expected this revelation to create a stir among the players and get them 'psyched' to play. What we got was an unnerving quiet

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relative to their response. Not at all what we had hoped would happen.

We did not know what to expect as the game started, but we soon found out that the Ledyard coach's message had come through loud and clear to our team. For the next 48 minutes, each player on our team gave everything they had - and then some. They were focused on the mission at hand and undistracted by anything negative that happened during the game. The old cliché became a reality when, for 48 minutes, twenty two players on our team worked as one. Despite being out manned and, frankly, outgunned at almost every position, we gave Ledyard everything they wanted - and more. The Ledyard J.V. team never took the field. We had a chance to win late in the game but lost by a score of 7-6. As a Ledyard league official later relayed to one of our league officers, the Ledyard team had never taken a physical pounding like they did during those four quarters. For Will and me, we will always remember this game as the one time in our lives when we watched boys become young men right in front of our eyes.

If you don't think that our post game meeting was emotional, you could not be more wrong. I am not too proud to admit I had tears in my eyes – and many more than that running down my face - when I addressed the team. Will stumbled along in his talk with the team, doing his famous (between he and I, anyway) lip biting routine to assist him in keeping his composure. Many of the players were in tears as well, but they were not tears of despair. They were more the result of a massive release of emotion now that the game was over. One of my defensive players told me, publicly, he loved me after my address to the team was over. I told him I

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loved him, too. After what these players had just given, not only for Will and I as coaches but more importantly for their teammates and themselves, there was more than enough love to go around.

Let me say right now that I hope that each of you have an opportunity at least once in your life to be as proud of someone as Will and I were of our team on that night. The kids who practiced in a clearing that was more rocks than grass, and had no equipment to speak of, had taken on one of the premier teams in the league and had more than held their own. Pride like that is the most awesome feeling in the world!

Now the scoreboard that night said we lost. Yes, we lost the game, but we won that night. While the confident Ledyard team chalked up another victory – and only a victory - our players chalked up something else. To a player they learned that they could face a difficult obstacle head on. They learned first hand the value of teamwork. They now understood what it meant to depend on someone else and have them depend on you in return. They learned that when people work together, remain focused on a goal, and refuse to be distracted, there is nothing they cannot accomplish. More importantly, each player that night learned they are capable of much more than to that moment in time, they ever thought was possible. That makes them winners in my book.

Each of you will have moments like this in your life. The 'scoreboard' will tell you the victory is not yours, but you will know in your heart that what the experience has taught you is far more valuable. I have found that when you put forth your best effort, and achieve more than you thought you

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could, that is a victory by any definition. More importantly, it is a victory you can build on – one that can lead you to future success. As I have told my players on many occasions, you always do your best and you never apologize for the results.

The trick is all in how you look at it. Remember, you have the option of thinking, “I didn’t achieve the ultimate goal – a victory, the highest test score, the fastest time, etc. - so, therefore, I have failed”, or thinking, “What I did accomplish is significant. Maybe I am more capable than I give myself credit for being. With a little more work, next time I will do even better.” (Notice I said ‘next time I will do better’, not “next time I might do better.”) Remember this old Chinese proverb, “In every loss there is gain.” Another way of saying that is “Every cloud has a silver lining.” If you look, I know you can find it.



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