

It's All About Winning

By Susan Ellis

Ever since I can remember I loved to compete in sports. Didn't much matter which ones, pick-up baseball and street hockey, softball, track and field, field hockey, speed skating, whatever. If there was a high energy sport going on around me I was in there like a dirty shirt. And I hated to lose, or at least I thought so. Losing made me downright angry. Not a pretty picture at times. (And yes, I am blushing with embarrassment over my childhood antics.) I don't remember anyone taking me aside and adjusting my attitude, although maybe they did and I was just too stubborn to listen.

I think my changing perspective of sport was a veeeerrry slow evolution. I remember the day my high school field hockey team was beaten out for the provincial championship by another highly skilled team. We played our hearts out, played very well, and lost on penalty shots. So why didn't I feel so bad about losing that match? I really felt like a winner that day. Strange!

I remember the day I came second in a race at a North American Championships – a race I fully expected to win. I got off to an unusually slow start. All I can remember about the race is passing like crazy, just going for it. It still wasn't enough to win, though. But the awesome feeling of those crazy passes is one I'll never forget. And again I felt like a winner.

As for races that I won, I can honestly say I only remember one. And I think I only remember it because my coach told me my time could have been so much better if I'd focused on my technique rather than just going out and hacking it. That ticked me off because it was a North American record! What the heck was he yammering about. As I thought about it later that night, I started laughing at myself. Yep, I probably looked like a chicken trying to cross an icy road, and by golly he was right! Yes, I got a record, but did I really win? Not all the way, although I can still allow a pat on the back for the fast time. (Thanks, Yvon).

I don't quite know when it happened but there came a day when I finally realized that although I loved to win, or hated to lose, whatever way you want to term it, I loved just putting out very best effort and performance more.

What a weight off my shoulders! I found a new way to win! And the more I did it, the better I felt! Even in training, I often found myself picking days where I decided I was going to be champion of the world (training wise that is). And guess what – pretty soon I was champion of the world more days than not. What an awesome feeling! Although I never got to skate in a world championship, I am proud of the effort I put into trying to get there.

After coaching for so many years I see myself in many of the young kids coming up. Of course they want to win. Our jobs as coaches and parents is to teach them that there are many ways to win. When we react in a negative manner when a kid doesn't win or

are happy and provide positive feedback only when they do win we send a clear message that the outcome is the only thing that matters.

At a recent competition a parent was quite irate because he thought his son had not tried his best and was heading to chew him out. I stopped him and asked to talk to the boy first. When I asked the boy how he felt about his race he told me he felt he skated a very good technical race. Score! He said he may have been able to go faster but he kept his main focus. Score again! And now for the third home run – he set a 2 second personal best! I forget where he actually finished in that race, but that kid really won, didn't he?

Down, dad, down! (By the way, dad, if you know who you are, thanks for listening first. You are going to make a great skating dad!)

Another young fellow had already won one medal in the competition. In the next race he did not advance to the final. He was behind right from the start of the race and kind of gave up. He came off the ice angry and crying because he could not win the competition now. We discussed behaviour expectations, true champions, champions in life show sportsmanship in winning and also when they don't win. But more importantly we discussed what winning meant in the wide scope of things. Would his Mom, Dad, coaches love him if he won. Of course we would. Would we love him if he didn't. Of course we would. Would we love him if he won with grace – yes. Would we love him if he threw a tantrum if he lost – yes, of course, but we would be very disappointed in his behaviour as it is not what we expect of a true champion. We told him that above all else we wanted him to build character, being a good sport while putting everything he had into trying to win, and accepting when he didn't win. Well, the next race he didn't win either, but I can tell you that boy is proud of the effort he put into trying. So he did win after all. (C – I'm proud of the champion you are becoming.)

So, parents and coaches, if we ask the kids to put winning and competition in perspective, then we have to do the same. Ya, ya, ya, I know, we're all just trying to do our best for our kids. But ask yourself if your actions really reflect what is best for your CHILD. Are your actions/words helping or hurting? If you are angry and bickering with other parents, trust me, YOUR KID WILL KNOW about it and this takes away from the joy of sport. Are you instilling that winning is the only acceptable thing or are you teaching them other ways to win? If you want your child to be a true champion, then your actions and words must reflect it.

Out of all the hundreds of you that will read this perhaps only one or two or none of your kids will go on to Olympic Games. If they do, that's great, and I sincerely hope they are truly great champions in all ways. For the rest of the kids, they will outgrow that Category 1 skin suit they earned or it will become tattered, torn and forgotten in some corner of their closet. Eventually it will be thrown in the garbage. When they grow up and leave the nest their medals and trophies will be left behind for you to dust (sorry Mom).

What they will have to take with them is memories. And it's up to all of us, athletes, parents, and coaches to make sure they are good ones. So let them play, and laugh, and make friends, and help them to put in best efforts always, and help them to win races with grace and lose with grace, and teach them there are many ways to win and be a champion.

Have Fun and Happy Skating!