

Balancing Life and the Pursuit of Victory and Success

Russell C. Smelley Westmont College Santa Barbara, CA October 8, 2009 (revised 1/6/2015)

How does one balance the pursuit of winning, a seemingly self-centered pursuit, and the development of individual and team character? Is victory the ultimate proof of one's success? Does an individual or team have to triumph in order to have done their best? Is success synonymous with victory, triumph and conquest when related to sports endeavors? It seems that a few definitions need to be supplied from Webster's dictionary.

Success is to succeed in obtaining a desired object or end, for things to turn out well, a favorable termination. **Victory** is an achievement of mastery or success in a struggle or endeavor against odds or difficulties. Victory, conquest, triumph mean a successful outcome in a contest or struggle. **Victory** stresses the fact of winning against an opponent or against odds. **Conquest** implies the subjugation of a defeated opponent or enemy. **Triumph** suggests a brilliant or decisive victory or an overwhelming conquest.

To seek to win is to be purposeful in one's efforts to achieve to the best of one's ability to come out on top in the score. Pride can be an awkward and unseemly demonstration of self-centered adulation and even arrogance which is often seen these days in sports. But there is a place for exultation in one's victory, to express exuberance at having achieved a goal and captured the laurel wreath. Doing one's best does not necessarily mean that one is victorious, but doing one's best does mean that one has been successful. Seeking to do one's best, in a world where actual winners are few and losers are many, is to go in search of or to discover how to do one's best. To be a winner in sports typically means to be the victor. The larger part of being a winner is to be successful through praiseworthy ability and hard work. To be the victor can be the ultimate attainment in sport. To be a winner is to have done one's best, regardless of the outcome. Coach John Wooden, a most successful coach whose teams often knew victory as well said this about success. "Success is peace of mind which is a direct result of self-satisfaction in knowing you did your best to become the best you are capable of becoming."

Athletics allows participants to experience a down to earth raw expression of emotional effort. Putting one's self on the line where performance is measured against another team or against a set of standards, like a 400 meter race, takes courage and determination. The chance of failure is real and every athlete has tasted such defeat and it can be bitter, yet motivating. We ask athletes to demonstrate good sportsmanship when they lose by controlling their emotions and congratulating the other team or individual. Should they not feel dejected about losing at something for which they worked so hard? The expression of disappointment at having tried valiantly to do one's best and having come up short is legitimate, but not life threatening. In the same manner, should the athlete be denied the moment of exultation and exuberance that rises so swiftly from the deep seated soul with a shout of triumph? It does not have to be an attempt to humiliate the opponent but should be the singular or team time of celebration for having achieved the result of hard and purposeful work. And ultimately, the athlete needs to learn the self-satisfaction of having done one's best regardless of the outcome by score or place. Determining what is one's best with a realistic viewpoint is one of the challenges faced by a coach as athletes typically think of winning as success and losing as failure. Unfortunately, many coaches respond in the same manner. Basing performance on doing one's best takes the focus away from victory and defines success in a more

redemptive manner. Can the athlete and coach accept a best effort as a successful effort? Can both learn that best efforts are the way to winning?

The pursuit of athletic victory and the disappointment of athletic defeat can greatly enhance one's personal growth and demonstrate the character of participants. With a wise mentor for a coach, a life perspective can be given in times of defeat and victory. Success can be defined in different terms than winning and losing. What is truly important in the athlete's life can be better understood in these circumstances as life lessons. Win or lose, striving to do one's best is an opportunity to strengthen one's character through adversity. It is important that a coach develop a philosophy that sees past winning and losing in order to emphasize the character development that sport participation offers. Work hard to have the opportunity to win, but don't put winning as the final and ultimate goal of the contest.

Louis Zamperini offers some perspective on lessons he learned from challenging races where he was often harassed to try and break his stride and cause him to lose heart. In an NCAA mile final, some Eastern athletes were instructed to gang up on Zamperini. "The next day, a picture of me in the papers showed the extent of how I'd been butchered. I was wrapped in tape and looked like I'd gotten into a hockey brawl. This made victory all the more sweet." . . . "I didn't know it then, but my persistence, perseverance, and unwillingness to accept defeat when things looked all but hopeless were part of the very character traits I would need to make it through World War II alive. Of course, you don't have to live through a war to have those qualities work for you every day. Sometimes a day in the office or raising the kids is just as challenging." (Zamperini, p. 33)

Sports participation can allow athletes to express their emotions and not feel that emotions are the enemy. Emotions are psychologically our friends, telling us how we are doing. Emotions are not the vessels of decision making but the conduit of understanding what is important to us. Learning what it means to be successful in everyday life is a valuable lesson from athletic pursuits. A crisis truly reveals what we believe and where our character is grounded. Athletics is a safe and effective crucible (chosen adversity and controlled crisis) to practice the needed lessons of working hard and striving well with humility, grace, pride in self and love of others in times of victory and defeat. For young people, it is a safe place to learn more about themselves and to work out unresolved emotions. There are more difficult life situations that lie ahead and will really matter, so sports can be developing the character of the participants in this safe crucible of personal expression.

Winning and losing in athletics matter only a little in the big picture of life. What does matter is what the participants are gaining from the experience. Still, for that moment when one has lost or won, it can feel so very important and one gets to taste that edge of life that reveals how one will respond to the gains and losses of life. Ultimately, when can one say with satisfaction that one has done one's best, winning and losing are beside the point.

Louis Zamperini sheds some light on this subject of winning and losing with grace. "I always knew that eventually I'd lose a race. After my very first win, I'd gone undefeated for three and a half years, but it was inevitable that one day I would not cross the line first. I often wondered how I'd act when that happened. Would I be ashamed? Resentful? Angry? I honestly had no idea. When I won races they were often by ten, twenty, thirty yards. I'd be on cloud nine. . . I'd watch as friends and family of the other runners consoled them. I could easily picture how the person who

beat me would be treated---and wondered if I'd need the consolation I'd seen them get. When the time came, I was determined to do it right. I wanted to lose cheerfully, so 'when it happened in a close race that I thought I had won, I put my arm around the winner' and said, "That was a brilliant race, and you deserved to win." I had a smile on my face. His mother and father stood there with their mouths open. Then his mother hugged me. That's the way it should be. If you give everything and you lose, so what? It's not going to put you in your grave. I walked away knowing I could handle defeat gracefully, and I had more self-esteem from that than from winning the race. Today it tears me apart when I see an athlete lose and, maybe he or she doesn't cry, but they sit there with their heads down feeling horrible, and sometimes angry with themselves, for everyone to see. It's terrible. (Zamperini, p. 26-27)

No one loses who has striven to put forth the best effort for the circumstances. This becomes the transformational time when character becomes based on the qualities of the soul and not the accomplishments of life. This becomes the time when sport serves its most useful purpose to the individual and society.

Zamperini, Louis & David Rensin, **Don't Give, Don't Give In**, Harper Collins, 2014