

The Agony Of Deparent

- *John Kessel, USA Volleyball Director of Education, Grassroots, Disabled & Beach Volleyball*

As I watch parents and coaches agonizing over defeat, and in the rapture of victory, I think two key things are missing.

1. The parents need help in enjoying all matches; losses as well as victories.
2. We are good at the lessons of winning, but we simply do not learn enough from losses or temporary setbacks.

The fact that so many seem to forget, but an essential, key fact that is true in the hundreds of thousands of volleyball matches played world wide each day...is simple.

Half the teams playing...lose...or for those wanting percentages, all matches result in 50 percent of the teams in each contest ending up as the loser.

I feel we are not investing enough time learning the values and lessons that are to be gained in the journey, through the losses, not just the wins. I believe we need to better realize this fact, of half the teams losing, and rejoice in the wonderful and unique qualities of this challenging team sport, wins or losses. The greatest thing to learn is to give your all, but even having done that, there are no guarantees of success. Because it is not guaranteed just because you want to win so badly, you find fewer moments of taking winning for granted.

Related to this is the fact that in the scheme of things, there can only be one champion, even in divisions like the NCAA or some Jr. Olympic Volleyball Regions where hundreds of teams are fighting. While winning the Junior Olympic Volleyball National championships is a goal for all, and attending the event is where the largest numbers of lessons and experiences happen. There, hundreds are "losers," and only one is the "victor." It is often that the best message or lesson to gain in volleyball comes from the losses.

Simply put, we need to teach the journey. There are too many in the sport who are whining, blaming everyone but themselves, sulking, crying., even threatening to sue...This is just a GAME, and thus, supposed to be FUN. We are so blessed with the chance to compete, in good gyms, great volleyballs, well organized events. I have in my office a ball made by kids in Africa made from the leaves of a banana tree. Those kids compete (half winning and half losing) on dirt courts over a rope. The boisterous joy of their play, and the good nature seen by both their winners and losers is a lesson all in many other nations would benefit from.

One of the most common errors is when people making mountains out of molehills, over-reacting to the little errors in the game as if they all are gold medal points. Chill. Ignore the errors. Celebrate the successful plays. Look long range and at the bigger picture. Focus on the performance and process, not the outcome. Learn to control what you can control, simply just yourself, and not even your spouse or team parents, let alone the field of play. Every play and match simply cheer on your child. It is a game of fun for your child, not a dream of college scholarships or pro sports for you. If you find yourself thinking that winning is a relief that you/the team did not lose, rather than a thrill, take time to refocus and rethink the program. The game is not about you. It is about your child's learning a great lifetime sport and the lessons therein.

Citius Altius Fortius. I am teaching these values to my children's soccer teams, even though they are only seven and nine years old. Wins and losses do not enter into this formula of Swifter, Higher, Stronger, for those are individually developed first and foremost. It is your son or daughter's hard work, determination, and effort that gives them the chance to compete. Mistakes end most rallies, and there will be countless mistakes. Take Stephen Glenn's words to heart - "Mistakes are wonderful ways to learn..."

Do not get me wrong, losing is not as much fun as winning. But losing happens half the time in our sport, for we have no ties. Along the way, the momentum changes and runs of good and bad play are part of the game. In daily life we have lots of little setbacks. There are only a few lottery winners but millions of losers, yet millions still play. Watching the temper tantrums of some after losses is an embarrassment to the sport. We must eradicate the temper tantrums, verbally and physically abusive coaching and spectator behavior from our sport. The clipboard slamming, foot stomping, chair yanking preschool actions of supposedly professional coaches. There should be no shame if one loses having done your best. And for those learning the game, you may not do your best, for you are still learning. The late Flo Hyman once aptly said, "We did not lose the gold medal, we won the silver," as she knew she had given her all.

When the parents stop being supportive, no longer looking at and pointing out what was good - they become part of the opponent's strength. When a coach starts yelling and angry and unsupportive - and changes the numbers from seven vs. seven - six players and the coach, to eight vs. six. Unsupportive parents might even throw the balance towards the opponents even more. Remember, this is a team thing. In the Olympic sport of beach volleyball it is more clear when one of the two teammates is playing below par. On a six person team, the blend means each player will be part of the successes as well as the setbacks. Those players who err, in serving, or counter attacking or in any way that results in the game or match being awarded to the opponent, oft feel the scapegoat.

The club program's philosophy should be written down and understood. Practice is the competition where your child will learn greatly, and prove his or her tournament playing time. At the highest level, at the Olympics, parents of USA players watched their daughters training for years, and in the Olympics, only step on the court for one point for the entire Olympiad. Meanwhile at the lowest levels, the worst team will win. By that we want you to understand that if your son or daughter is training for three contact volleyball, the one hit and over teams will win most often, until more experience is gained, after which the three hit teams will win every time.

So the guidelines for those setback times, for players and parents alike, looks to USA Volleyball and the Education Department to be something like:

1. Focus on what you can control, - your own actions, not that of others.
2. Do your best to be the best you can be, and focus on that task.
3. Congratulate the winners sincerely - respect for your opponents by all in a program, parents included, and the effort they bring to the game, is what makes each player better.
4. No despair, blaming, excuses, or whining
5. Remember, it is a GAME, teaching lessons of life, and life after the loss starts as soon as the final whistle blows.
6. The Chinese proverb says so much – Winning and losing are temporary; friendships last forever.

And while I am at it, let's let the referees call the game as best they can as well. USAV has the best officiating training program in the world. It is one that results in about 20 international level referees annually, with many of these referees doing World Championships and Olympic Game events, even with the same 217 national federations that are FIVB members. I promise you that like every player out there, the referee will make errors.

Focus on the truth, that no referee ever makes a mistake in their heart. They call it as they see it from their vantage point, and that is unique to their position. If calls are better made from the bench or spectator seating area, maybe we should have the line judges and referees sitting in either of these places, and not standing on the referee platform or on the lines... Like our players, referees get better with more training and more competition. Please take the time to thank these people who are an integral part of all players' experiences on the court.

The bottom line is that your son/daughter will look back on this time as a Jr. Olympian, and cherish most, the experiences OFF the court. The travel adventures, new places and faces, the meals that were horrible in some funny way - and the times both parents and coaches gave them support and recognition even when they were playing poorly or losing. Sometimes we win games just because we are the better team, or we have the better players. Feel good about those wins, but realize they probably came easy. Cherish the experiences when you weren't the better team and you did your best, created opportunities to be successful and were able to pull out a positive result.

For more information, read "So You Want To Be A Better Spectator" in the IMPACT Manuals and Jr. Olympic Championships Programs, and on the web at www.usavolleyball.org in the Education Program's New Articles area.