

Getting the Edge

Am I only as good... as my last win?

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There is always much speculation about performance when major sporting events such as the Masters Golf Championships or the World Series approach. Questions always arise as to how certain players will perform under the pressure of competing for a major title or for the world championship. Whether it's golf or wrestling, chess or baseball, ring toss or divorce, this question will always be asked: "Who will win and who will lose?" Competitions have totally become win-or-lose propositions.

Legend has it that the great football coach, Vince Lombardi, once said: "Winning isn't everything, it's the only thing." But what Lombardi actually said was this: "Winning isn't everything, but striving to win is." Does this philosophy make any sense to you?

Sport in our society serves many purposes. It is a physical, mental, and social activity. It is fun and a very enjoyable experience, both for participants and spectators. But what importance does sport have to an athlete beyond enjoyment? Athletics can be seen as a testing ground where an athlete gains a sense of competence, achievement, and recognition. Sport is valuable because it sets the groundwork for establishing, testing, and understanding one's own values. It plays a role in an individual's growth and development. In other words, athletes can take the benefit of what they learn on the mat and apply it to other

facets of their lives.

There is another objective to sport: to WIN. Winning is an exhilarating experience, and the ultimate result of hard work. Our society rewards athletes immediately and powerfully for that reason. However, it is important to keep in mind that winning is the objective of a contest, NOT the objective of sport participation. Striking a balance between these two objectives is necessary and can be accomplished with this motto: *Athletes first, winning second*. While society's views of the balance between partici-

affects a wrestler's self-confidence and self-esteem, and therefore his performance. A wrestler who feels the impact of standards or expectations set too high could feel like a total "loser," and want to give up. This is known as burnout, and happens all too often to seasoned wrestlers. They lose confidence in themselves because they lose too much. The sport no longer is fun, and the full value of competing is lost. That wrestler begins to ask himself: "Am I only as good as my last win?" Coaches, you must prevent this situation at all costs!

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pation and contest are fickle, coaches must resist these societal forces that encourage an athlete to win at all costs, and to be judged solely on the basis of wins and losses.

So, you may ask, "What is the coach's role in the big picture of competing in sport, given all these competing forces?" As you already know, any successful coach wears many hats. He functions as administrator, personnel manager, diplomat, strategist and tactician, recruiter and trainer, public relations expert, sales manager, psychologist, judge, and teacher. And if all that isn't exhausting, he's a role model, too! So a coach's philosophy and teachings are highly influential upon his wrestlers, which for the coach is truly an awesome responsibility. What he says and how he says it

So how can it be done? What strategies can make wrestling "win-win" for everyone?

In his book *Don't Shoot Yourself in the Foot*, Dr. Daniel Amen suggests that the best strategy is to use competition to your advantage by actively seeking out "win-win" situations. How do your wrestlers view competition? Do they set attainable personal goals based on their performance in competition? Do they see competition as a way to improve their skills, rather than just as a game that needs to be won? Do they believe that competition can spur them to be the best they can be? Do they feel good when they win, whether it's by one point or by a pin? Do they

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realize that their personal worth is not tied up in wins and losses? Even when they lose, do they learn valuable lessons from the competition? Do they view mistakes or errors as opportunities to learn and improve? Do they know that, although winning is good, striving to win is even more important?

So, you ask, "Why does my philosophy as a coach have anything to do with my wrestlers' attitude toward competition?" It has everything to do with it, according to most experts. The more positive the coach's philosophy, the more motivated his wrestlers are to perform to their potential and to strive for excellence. Such athletes are better equipped to succeed in wrestling and in life - no matter what the scoreboard says.

Today, in 1997, we know far more about training a wrestler to become a champion than we did years ago. In an old boxing movie I saw as a child, I remember the coach in the corner saying, "Come on, Joe, you can do it!" That seemed to be all that was necessary back then. But today we know more, and we know better. As important as physical skills are to a wrestler, they are only useful to the extent the wrestler can display them when needed in a match. Therefore, a coach's teaching should emphasize all aspects of mental conditioning, from as early as age as possible. It is not as difficult as you may think, and it will benefit you as well as your students.

Research has shown that all champions have several qualities in common: the ability to set appropriate personal goals, the motivation to strive for them, the capability of relaxing on command and focusing on the task at hand. They dare to risk making errors to learn, and grow from praise and constructive criticism.

They have acquired the skills of mental rehearsal and mental recall to visualize the winner within themselves. Most of all, however, champions have learned to talk positively to themselves, so that their thoughts will move them in a winning direction.

Effective coaches can teach these skills to their wrestlers. These will be presented in future issues. For now, though, start setting up your own plan for success, and begin to look at winning from a new perspective. By exploring your own philosophy and coming up with some meaningful answers, by the end of the season you no longer will ask yourself: "Am I only as good as my last win?"

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