

Success in a One-Win Season

by Tal Alter, PCA Senior Trainer



I like to win. I did as a competitive athlete, and I do as a coach. So what could I learn from a one-win season? Everything. Last fall, I became the coach of a newly formed 14-Under travel baseball team called the "Gamers." As a first step, my fellow coaches and I wanted to establish a strong team culture and clearly define our priorities to both players and parents. Before the season, we held a parents' meeting and wrote a letter to every family requesting that they "Honor the Game" with their conduct. We discussed our goals with our players and let them know that we would stress the pursuit of excellence over the win and that a gamer's most noticeable attribute should be his desire to play hard and work harder. Playing the game this way, we told them, would make it fun.

At practice, with equal energy to teaching the mechanics of the game, we drilled hustling on and off the field and picking up the gloves of stranded base runners after our half-innings at bat. We told our players that successfully accomplishing these goals would represent at least 14 victories in a seven-inning game. After recording three outs, we should have all nine of our players off the field before the opponent had one on; after our at-bat, nine of our players should be sprinting on the field before the other team had one off. Helping stranded base runners with their equipment demonstrated the teamwork, alertness and unselfishness needed to accomplish these 14 wins. In our culture, Gamers were expected to take risks and push themselves to make plays beyond what they thought possible. In order to do this, players had to allow themselves to make mistakes and rebound from failures.

We discussed the importance of mentally "flushing" errors and strikeouts, and we followed through by never criticizing mistakes (although we did let players know when we felt their efforts lagged). We also emphasized that teammates played an important role in this process. To make sure that players were mentally in the game at all times, we had everyone in the dugout face the field, stand and support their teammates when the ball was in play. In addition, parents were not allowed to enter the dugout, so all conversations were between people directly involved in the game.

We emphasized effort and learning to allow players total control over their success; they responded with enthusiasm on and off the field. We also gave players ownership of their learning process. After games, players talked first, and important growth came from their self-critique and analysis.

Throughout the season, players gave great effort and improved. Most importantly, they came to practice with smiles on their faces. Our first season was a huge success. We won one game on the scoreboard, but had a multitude of our own victories. Under the common definition of success, we would have reevaluated our methods and changed our approach for the next season. But our players and their parents had done everything we had asked of them, and we believed winning would come as a byproduct of hard work, not because it was an overriding goal.

We were right: our parents supported the approach. They cheered for the effort made by both teams and never questioned an umpire's decision. Players took pride in what it meant to be a Gamer. They played hard and worked harder. Before the end of the next summer season, we were winning more than we were losing. A one-win season tested our ability to redefine success. Honoring that principle made the eventual scoreboard victories even sweeter.

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