

Winning Isn't Everything

Great competitors are bred, and great sportsmen are born. I came to that conclusion at a Little League T-ball game in Davis, California, for which my son, Matt, was umpiring. This conclusion was cemented solidly just last week when a friend of mine related a horror story from her son's Little League game.

"One of the coaches just ripped off a kid's head for making a mistake," she noted. "What does that teach him?"

In both of our books, nothing.

We have become a nation addicted to winning.

"We're number one" puts smiles on sports fans' faces. Running a good race doesn't always.

This premise relates to every facet of life, whether at home, at church, at school, at work or at play. Numbers are crunched, awards are pursued, emotions are stifled in favor of one-upmanship. Even the Joneses have a hard time keeping up.

Life too often becomes a tough game with more losers than winners. When claiming the prize eliminates the good in playing, no one wins. Real rewards come from teamwork and playing the game unselfishly for the good of the whole.

On a hot, sunny afternoon, a small boy stepped up to bat. The crowd watched like hawks for his move, waiting for the sought-after home run that most likely wasn't to be. After all, these kids were five and six years old, much too little to stroke a ball past the pitcher, if at all.

The little guy's determination showed in his stance: gritted teeth, slightly bulging eyes, hat-clad head bobbing slightly, feet apart, hands with a death grip on the bat.

In front of him was a small softball, sitting perched like a parrot on a lone tee, awaiting the six swings that the batter was allowed.

Strike one.

"Come on, you can do it!" came a solitary voice out of the bleachers.

Strike two.

"Go for it, Son!" the proud father yelled encouragingly.

Strike three.

"Go, go, go..." the crowd joined in.

Strike four.

"You can do it!" just the father and a couple of viewers crooned, others losing interest and turning to bleacher conversations.

"YOU CAN DO IT!" And suddenly bat hit ball, amazing the crowd and the little boy, who stood rock still, watching it travel slowly past the pitcher on its way to second base.

"Run!"

The stands rumbled with stomping feet.

"Run, run!"

The little boy's head jerked ever so slightly and he took off toward third base.

"No," the crowd yelled. "The other way."

With a slight cast of his head toward the bleachers, the boy turned back toward home.

"NO!" My son, the umpire, waved him toward first base.

The kids on both teams pointed the way. The crowd continued to cheer him on. Confused, he ran back to third. Then following the third baseman's frantic directions, he finally ran toward first base but stopped triumphantly on the pitcher's mound. The pitcher moved back, not sure what to do next. The crowd stood, shaking the bleachers with the momentum. All arms waved toward first base. And with no thought for his position, the first baseman dropped his ball and ran toward the pitcher.

"Come on," he yelled, grabbing the hand of the errant batter, and tugged him toward first base while the crowd screamed its approval. The ball lay forgotten as a triumphant twosome hugged each other on the piece of square

plastic that marked the spot where lives are forever shaped.

Two little boys, running hand in hand, toward a goal that only one should have reached. Both came out winners.

In fact, there wasn't a loser in the stands or on the field that summer day, and that's a lesson none of us should ever forget.

Winning is more than being number one. Winning is helping another when the chips are down. It's remembering to love one another, despite the flaws that sometimes appear in the fabric of daily life.

No one will ever remember the score of that summer afternoon encounter. Competition, usually fettered by jeering remands, lost to sportsmanship, an innate formula for winning.

When you get to first base with opposing teammates, families, friends and grandstanders behind you, a home run is never that far down the road.