



# Kids need to learn how to lose

## Do we teach them how? Do we know how to teach it?

By MICHAEL LANGLOIS , Founder of Prospect Communications Inc.

One of the criticisms about the introduction of Long-Term Player Development (LTPD) in sports such as soccer here in Canada is that it “kills competition.”

The truth is, that is not what LTPD is about. What LTPD does look to do is to move clubs, coaches and parents away from an obsession with winning at the very young ages and instead, focus on ways to help each individual player develop their skills. Youngsters who want to play purely for fun can do that. Those that aspire to a future in the sport will be able to focus on what’s really most important: enhancing the skills they need to achieve their goals.

The above is ideally accomplished in an environment that allows kids to try things and make mistakes in games—without worrying that a wayward pass may cost their team a victory and a chance to be promoted to a better league next season.

Too often in sports like soccer, coaches look for (or “poach” in many instances) and select for their teams the biggest, fastest, oldest (born early in the calendar year) players to build their team. A couple of these players at U9, U10 and U11 can often create a winning team. Actually developing the skills of all the players on the teams becomes an afterthought and gets lost in translation.



What about the small player or the late-bloomer? Forget it. He or she gets lost in the shuffle when winning is what matters.

But back to the criticism of LTPD: some opposing LTPD say that kids need to “learn how to lose” and that by taking away scores at the young ages, we are doing a disservice to youngsters who need to face these important life lessons.



Well, while we all have to learn how to handle life's trials and hardships, it's difficult to see why little kids at the ages of 8, 9 and 10, for example, need to deal with losing a game. For anyone in sports, there is plenty of time to learn to deal with losing and with things not going our way. There is still a lot of competition within the LTPD philosophy, but the focus is simply different. If nothing else, if it helps to reduce the number of youth coaches (and parents) who scream at young players to "just get rid of the ball" or "kick it out, kick it out..." and yell from the sidelines about what the adults see as mistakes—and thereby creating undue anxiety in youngsters paralyzed by the fear of making a mistake.

A sad point about the critics who can't accept a de-emphasis on scores and standings at young ages, and who harp on the notion that kids have to learn how to lose, is that many of those same people clearly don't do a very good job of actually teaching their own children how to lose.

We can say the words, "kids need to learn how to lose" but do we really understand what we should be teaching them? It's more than learning how to lose a game without temper tantrums, though that would be a start. It's learning how to win graciously. It's sportsmanship. It's attitude. It's working hard, truly doing your very best, then learning how to keep your wins and losses in youth sports in some kind of appropriate life perspective.

Too often, we visit local soccer fields and we see parents screaming on the sidelines and coaches out of control. We witness parents, coaches and even very young players yelling at referees showing a lack of respect for decisions that are made. Some of these same parents and coaches themselves don't know how to lose—and they are the people teaching the young athletes.

It's easy to spot star players who get all puffed up when they score the winning goal, but blame others and whine when they lose or who treat their less talented teammates with little respect. Is that what kids should be taught?

"It's way more than learning how to lose a game without temper tantrums..."

Who is actually helping them to learn how to be a better winner, loser and teammate?

Being a winner—as a coach, parent or player—surely is about much more than how many goals are scored in a game. That's part of the equation, but only part. And so often, that message is not taught. All the other important characteristics that make-up a winner including being a great teammate, setting the right kind of examples, supporting teammates when they are down and respecting the opposition are often simply ignored because the team scored at the end and they win the game.

There is much more to teaching our kids about life and coping with losing than we can share here today in this

space. But let me reiterate the point: it's fine to talk about the importance of kids learning how to lose. But who is doing the teaching? Are we simply leaving the kids on their own? Are we adults—coaches, parents, teachers, sports leaders—setting any kind of example? What values do we hold that we are passing along? More

importantly, what values do we actually live and model?

Are all coaches, even grassroots coaches that benefit from ongoing personal development, getting the professional development to learn how to better communicate and help kids with learning to lose? Because if the individuals teaching these life lessons about losing are the same people who make youngsters want to quit sport by the age of 13, because their parents and coached killed their love of sport, then we have much bigger issues than whether LTPD discourages keeping scores at young ages. 

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