

Jim's Perspective...

Winning and Losing

As a boy, I participated in all the traditional sports; football, basketball, baseball and track. Little Chiefs baseball began for boys at about the third or fourth grade as best as I can recall. The other three sports, at least in the Catholic school system, began for boys when they started junior high school which would have been seventh through ninth grade. The one constant throughout all my years of playing sports was, naturally, a commanding exhortation to win! You don't want to be the loser. I always enjoyed athletics with my friends. Due to a lack of eye/hand coordination, my basketball career ended after seventh grade. As I mentioned earlier, my baseball career ended after eighth grade, in part, for the same reason (Also, you may recall that I was cut from the ninth grade team, even though the school had a firm rule that all ninth graders were not to be cut, because they mistakenly thought I was an eighth grader). Trying to hit a ball with a wooden stick just didn't work for me. I played midget football for Leon's grocery store in junior high school, and all three years of football in high school because I understood the concept of how to run into someone. I was also on the wrestling team in high school because I managed to learn the concept of throwing another human being to the ground. Anyone who played football was required to be on the track team but I was slow and just not interested in running around in a circle on a track.

Girls in the 1960's were generally not exposed to this competitive athletic environment. At Pius X there was no girls' basketball, softball or volleyball. Pius had no swimming pool and there was no girls' track squad and soccer was non-existent at that time. For girls, there was the "pep club" which almost all girls belonged to, and there were cheerleaders. Girls could also be a member of the school band. Each of the three high school classes elected four girls as cheerleaders, and my wife, Janie, was voted in as a cheerleader.

You may recall that in a fall article written a few years ago, I mentioned that upon graduating from high school, I looked forward to college life without the drumbeat of winning at all costs. I recall the pre-game football locker room scene with the team shouting, yelling and pumping itself up into a testosterone driven frenzy to beat the opponent. Or there were the extra techniques used by some wrestlers to gain advantage and win. Some ate garlic or onion before the match. Terrible breath! Others didn't take a shower for a few days before the match so that it felt as if you were wrestling a greasy pig! Anything, to win, and not lose. All of this tied in with some of society's expectations or standards that applied to boys. "Man up!" Strive to be the "big man on campus" or the star jock on the team. You know the hard and fast fundamental rule of society applicable to all boys, "Big boys don't cry." Instead, follow the John Wayne model of a quiet man who is strong and stoic.

Please don't misunderstand. Sports provides many positive experiences for boys and girls. They learn to work together as a team. It can provide a healthy lifestyle as young men and women develop physically. It also keeps boys and girls busy and out of trouble! However, as in most things in life, athletics is not a perfect endeavor.

The imperfections of athletics associated with the all-consuming goal of winning and not losing was eloquently illustrated in a recent TED Talk presented by author Pico Iyer. Pico grew up in London, but he and his wife moved to a town near Kyoto, Japan at a young age. His wife decided they should join a local health club in part because Pico was getting no exercise. She knew he played competitive ping pong as a boy in London, and the health club had a ping pong club. He joined the ping pong club. However, he learned that the ping pong club members had certain rules which all members were required to follow. The first rule was that they played doubles only, so everyone had a partner. The second rule was that a team could be declared a winner only after it had won two games. The third rule was that every five minutes, players would draw by lots for a new partner and start of a new game. With these rules in place, there never was an individual or team winner. As Pico put it, when ping pong was over for the day, “everyone leaves in a state of delight.” Everyone is left to feel as a winner, not a loser, which is a positive act of love towards each other. He found that as he participated in the ping pong club, he viewed this physical activity as one in which he played *with* other club members, not *against* them. He felt a connectivity amongst all the club members. Everyone was working together. That is a more true reflection of life, he said. He began to realize that if the game is nothing but an outcome where you win or lose, it imposes a binary system on the activity which is not like life at all. Life is full of things that change us every day. We experience ups and downs all the time, but in the end we really can’t say we won or lost in life. It’s not that simple. Often what is happening to us is so nebulous, or gray that we can’t even tell if the experience could be categorized as a win or a loss. And so, to Pico, the ping pong club was a truer reflection of life.

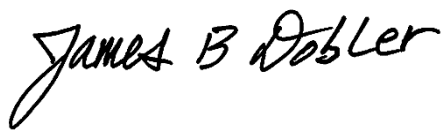
All of this brought back some of my boyhood experiences in athletics. It wasn’t so much an endeavor to teach boys about life. Instead, society had created for children a giant apparatus for the cultivation of hard skills in athletics and in scholastic achievement too. Children were coached on how to jump through many scholastic and athletic hoops. Yet, by far the most important decisions we would make – about whom to marry and whom to befriend, what to love and what to dislike, and how to control impulses – on these matters, young people were left almost entirely on their own. Yes, in athletics you learn to work together which is a good thing to know, but, again, in the end, life for most people does not boil down to either a black or white outcome in which you either win or lose. Living with people involves connectivity with others. It requires cooperation, respect, friendship, trust, and yes, love for one another. These elements swirl around us every minute of every day as a sort of emotional stew. We are hard wired to perceive emotion in ourselves and others all the time. I think too, that if all we did was assess if we won or lost each day, it would be a recipe for frustration and dissatisfaction. So athletics has its role in life, but a fanatical pursuit to win and not lose is not a reflection of the real meaning of life.

I attended a CPCU national conferment some years ago and in one of the general sessions the main speaker talked about all of this day to day interaction amongst people. She was an independent agent and owned her own agency. Her remarks centered on a theme of developing a culture of respect towards everyone involved with the agency (both clients and employees). She acknowledged that when a client comes into her agency, the relationship is one in which the customer knows little about insurance and she or her other agents are the experts on insurance. This can create an atmosphere of the dominant over the subservient, or, in a certain sense, a winner and a loser. While you can’t avoid the obvious that the agent will know more about

insurance than the client, she always, first and foremost, encouraged a culture in the agency that put the client first. She used a phrase to describe this culture. I loved it. I wrote it down and have never forgotten it. Her phrase was:

It is not “I am” – it is “you are.”

This relationship of a skilled or professional person providing a service to others occurs all the time. It can be a doctor and patient, or a contractor and a homeowner considering remodeling of the house. However, in each case there is always going to be some form of connectivity between the two people that sets the tone for how they feel about each other. That emotion can often be the most important part of the relationship and can be the thing that solidifies a long-term relationship. And so, I offer the agent’s phrase as a humble New Year’s resolution!



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