

Achievement in Sports and Life

One of the central tasks of becoming an effective adult is learning how to fulfill your own potential, to achieve goals, and to keep trying when faced with difficulties. As an achievement and performance setting, sports can either aid in or interfere with this important aspect of development. Managed correctly, youth sports can help youngsters to acquire the kinds of attitudes, values, and skills that promote achievement and success in all areas of life. Mismanaged, sports can create fear of failure, reduce enjoyment, undermine self-worth, and counter values of fair play. Which of these consequences occurs depends largely on the type of *motivational climate* that is created by coaches and parents.



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Success means different things to different people. Two different ways of defining success have been identified by researchers who study achievement motivation. An *ego orientation* is found in people who define success as winning or being better than others. They are always comparing themselves with others and don't feel successful unless they view

themselves as performing better than others. Anything short of victory is failure and indicates to them that they are inferior. For such people, the stakes are high for winning or losing, and they tend to become discouraged with their inferior ability and give up when they don't do better than those with whom they compare themselves. Some develop a high fear of failure because, to them, failure means inferiority.

A second and more healthy view of success is called a *mastery orientation*. Mastery-oriented people focus on their own effort and accomplishments instead of comparing themselves with others. In a sense, they compare themselves with themselves. They can feel success and satisfaction when they have learned something new, witnessed skill improvement in themselves, or given maximum effort. Even if they see themselves as less skillful than someone else, mastery-oriented people can feel competent and successful if they view themselves as doing their best to become the best they can be.



KEY PRINCIPLE

“Success is peace of mind, which is a direct result of self-satisfaction in knowing you made the effort to do the best of which you are capable.”

John Wooden, Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame player and coach

Both mastery-oriented and ego-oriented people are capable of great accomplishments. But the two approaches to success have some important effects on people's motives, feelings, and behavior. Specifically, *mastery-oriented* people are more likely to hang tough in the face of setbacks and, in the end, reach their potential. Such people share many desirable characteristics:

- They strive to win, of course, but the primary goal is to do their best and to focus on effort and preparation, things that are within their control.
- They are less likely to be afraid of making mistakes,

because they view mistakes as unfortunate but informative outcomes that give clues on how to do better next time.

- They feel encouraged when they see improvement coming from great effort and persistence.
- They tend to select challenging goals because they are not afraid of failing and know they can always try again.

In the long run, by focusing on becoming *their* best, mastery-oriented people are more likely to realize their potential and to be free of performance-destroying fear of failure that causes some athletes to "choke" under pressure.

In contrast, *ego-oriented* people often begin to question their competence when they don't exceed the performance of others. Such individuals can experience many unfortunate consequences:

- When they don't excel, they become discouraged and reduce their effort and persistence.
- They may avoid the challenge at hand and choose not to participate.
- They lose the fun of competition when faced with setbacks.
- They tend to quit participating (drop out) because of fear that they can't measure up to others.

In youth sports, athletes' attitudes toward success and achievement develop within the motivational environment created by significant adults—coaches and parents. Adults create the motivational climate by the values they communicate, particularly about what success is, and by the behaviors they reward or punish. In an ego-involving climate, the emphasis is on winning out over others (including both opponents and one's own teammates). It's fair to say that this statement by the late George Allen, a Pro Football Hall of Fame football coach, typifies an ego environment: "In this game, you're either a winner or a loser. Success means winning championships. Anything else is failure."

In an *ego-oriented climate*, coaches often focus their attention

on the most talented athletes, who have the greatest influence on winning. Effort and improvement are not emphasized as much as performance level. Rivalry among teammates may be encouraged by comparing them openly with one another. Inadequate performance or mistakes are often punished with criticism, teaching children that mistakes are to be avoided at all costs and thereby building fear of failure. Another unfortunate outcome associated with ego environments is the willingness to win at all costs, even if rule-breaking is required to gain the needed advantage. Obviously, this doesn't sound like a fun environment. And, in fact, athletes in such sport environments report much lower enjoyment than those in mastery environments.



KEY PRINCIPLE

“If you make winning games a life-or-death proposition, you're going to have problems. For one thing, you'll be dead a lot.”

Dean Smith, Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame coach

In a *mastery climate*, the goal is to foster positive growth as an athlete and as a person. The emphasis is on effort, learning, and personal improvement—doing what it takes to be *your* best. To be sure, winning is valued, but in a mastery climate, the adults realize that winning takes care of itself if athletes are having fun, improving their skills, giving maximum effort, and are not shackled with fear of failing. Mastery climates foster an atmosphere of mutual support and encouragement, and everyone, regardless of ability, is made to feel an important part of the team.



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Which approach is best for youth sports? Scientific research has provided a clear answer. Mastery climates are associated with greater sport enjoyment. Young athletes are more likely to develop “intrinsic” motivation for the activity, enjoying the activity for itself. They come to believe that effort is the key to success and value hard work and cooperation with others. In other words, they develop exactly the kinds of beliefs, attitudes, values, and work habits that lead to success in other areas of life as well. They internalize John Wooden’s definition of success, striving to become the best they can be. And who can ask more than that from any person? It is no accident, therefore, that the approach advocated by *Developing Young Athletes* is designed to help adults create a mastery-oriented motivational climate in which every athlete can be a winner, in sports as well as life.