

Winning

By Tony Pearson

?You don't win silver ? you lose gold!?! So ran one ad for Nike shoes, which was featured prominently at the 1996 Olympics held in Atlanta. After the Canadian women's eights rowing team finished second in their medal final, they all posed under a large version of that ad, holding up their silver medals (as well as a couple of single fingers) to mock its silliness. In fact, Nike withdrew the ad shortly afterward, although its sentiment lingers on for many.

In all contests, there is one winner, and a host of non-winners. Does that mean that anyone who doesn't finish first is a loser? Hardly.

When Pierre de Coubertin was trying to resurrect the Olympic Games, he wanted them held in Athens, to evoke the memory of the ancient Greek Olympics. But there was some resistance within Greece ? officials who feared that none of their athletes would win anything.

In reply, de Coubertin declared: ?There is no shame in being defeated; the shame is in not taking part.? Later he amplified the concept in writing the Olympic Creed: ?Just as the most important thing in life is not the triumph but the struggle, so the essential element of the Olympics is not to have conquered but to have contested well.?

There's a well-known meme on the Internet showing a scowling American gymnast at her silver medal presentation at the 2012 Olympics; the caption reads ?Taking part is what's important? Eh, No!?! But that misrepresents the actual athlete, MaKayla Maroney. The reigning world vault champion, she was disappointed with her performance. But her actual quote afterward was instructive: ?I still walked out with a silver medal and I'm happy about that. I also know I didn't deserve the gold medal because I fell on my second vault. It happens. It's gymnastics. You can't always be perfect. Sometimes things don't go as planned.? Exactly. Last week, Tori Howran and her teammates took the silver medal in the women's under-18 world championship. The team played all-out, and the final game was a thriller. The Canadian girls deserve a lot of celebration. Finishing second in world competition is a great accomplishment.

But finishing third, or fourth, or 10th, at a local cross-country race is also an achievement, when you give it your best shot. So is just playing in an out-of-town hockey or soccer tournament. So is setting a personal best in any activity. So is finishing a marathon or triathlon ? period. ?Finishing dead last is better than not finishing ? and way better than not even starting,? as the saying goes.

Sport and competition is supposed to be about bringing out and developing character. If winning is all we celebrate, then we are encouraging people to become armchair athletes and couch potatoes if they don't think they'll win. And we're telling them that learning isn't important either ? because there are always lessons to be learned by participation. Believe it or not, losing can provide major learning experiences. The bottom line is that you learn far more about life and about yourself when you're in the game rather than just watching.

In other words, you win by getting involved.

I recall the results of a large survey done among Little League players. The question was whether they'd rather ride the bench on a championship team, or play regularly on a losing team. Overwhelmingly, they said they'd rather play, even if they didn't win.

Don't get me wrong ? winning a championship is a great feeling. I coached soccer for some years, and won a couple of city championships ? and the shared feeling of euphoria afterwards in the dressing room is something I'll never forget. But I also had some teams that were, frankly, awful. Yet these players showed up for practices and games week after week. They wanted to play because they enjoyed the game, even though they weren't very good at it.

My favourite team was a second-division squad that made it to a tournament final, where they played the first division leader. They were bombed 6-1. But they were as happy as a tornado in a trailer park just at making it as far as they did.

American sports writer Grantland Rice captured the essence of this spirit when he wrote:

Keep coming back, and though the world may romp across your spine,
Let every game's end find you still upon the battling line;
For when the One Great Scorer comes to mark against your name,
He writes ? not that you won or lost ? but how you played the Game.