The Effect of Participation Trophies on Athlete Psychology

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Abstract

The problem with participation trophies is that their significance can be misconstrued by the people that receive them. Children are the main receivers of participation trophies, and if they end up continuing a career in sports, then it can have a lasting impact on their mental and physical health. Children’s sports organizations should limit the amount of participation trophies distributed because it will have a negative impact for children’s future in sports by creating an entitled outlook, making them less motivated and more prone to injury, and ultimately causing them to lose their athletic identity. Children take what they learned in childhood and apply it to what they do when they are older. In this situation for athletes, this means that they never become accustomed to failure. If they were always called winners in their youth, then they will expect everyone to hand them a trophy no matter how hard they try. This leads to a lack of motivation to refine their skills and a lack of effort in sports. Since this will lead to more problems in their future, it is recommended that children’s sports organizations cease the continuation of distributing participation trophies.

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Parents and coaches alike have different viewpoints on how failure affects young athletes. The corruption of an athlete’s mindset stems from their childhood experience on little league teams. Many teams feel that giving every participant a trophy will compensate for the emotional impact that losing has on people. However, if children never learn to fail, then they will never understand how to better themselves. Children’s sports organizations should limit the amount of participation trophies distributed because it will have a negative impact for children’s future in sports by creating an entitled outlook, making them less motivated and more prone to injury, and ultimately causing them to lose their athletic identity.

By never learning how to handle losing, many children often develop a fear of failure or a lack of caring to make any effort at all. This leads them to feel that they are always entitled to win and succeed, which is unrealistic in this world. In order to grow as a person or an athlete, people need to recognize failure as an opportunity to change their methods and do better in the future. Although they are not trying harder, their motivation to win stems from their entitlement and the fact that “more entitled people are motivated to pursue status” (Lange, Redford, & Crusius, 2018, p. 1). At this point, athletes are not playing to feel the joy of accomplishment or teamwork; they are trying to win in order to rise in the social hierarchy. Thus, when they lose, they can become angry at themselves or others and continue to lose the motivation to work harder for the right reasons. When athletes do not get to the expected level that they feel they deserve, then they distort reality even more by raising the bar for themselves to try to win back the status they think they are entitled to. For example, the starting quarterback on a high school football team has a couple of bad throws one game and causes the team to lose, so the coach brings in the second-string quarterback for the rest of the game causing the team to ultimately win. If the first-string quarterback had an entitled mentality and always got what he wanted in life, then he will feel underappreciated and immediately try to get back in the good graces of the coach. When athletes have rarely lost in the past, and they experience a situation like this, they begin to try harder in their sport, but with little knowledge on how to do so. Athletes who were always recognized as winners as children, because of participation trophies, do not understand that they will not always succeed in their future in sports. This hectic attempt at gaining recognition again can lead to serious problems for the athlete. Children’s sports organizations need to realize this change in mentality as the athletes get older since it is because of them that the athletes become this way. Not only can it cause a stress on relationships with teammates, but, more importantly, it can cause the athlete to become more prone to injury.

When athletes are programmed with the belief that they will always win, they become careless and reckless in games and practices. This is a major cause of serious career ending injuries. There are many different methods of injury in sports, and many are accidental because of poor judgement by the athletes. A lack of effort from players can relate back to their childhood when they did not have to try as hard in games that they were predetermined to get awarded for. Because of this, athletes can get into a mentality where they only focus on their own determination to win instead of working with their teammates. Many scientists, including Perera, Akerlund, and Hägglund (2019), believe that “social aspects were the greatest motivators” for athletes (p. 9). Moreover, when athletes begin to lose their sense of team spirit to focus on their own success, they can quickly lose motivation from not winning all the time. As in the high school quarterback example, the athlete could believe that he is the best of the best and his teammates should not receive greater recognition than he does. His entitled mentality and replacement on the team causes him to begin to compete against his own teammates rather than the opposing team. By being replaced, his “individual attraction to the group” went down, and the “individual’s feeling of group integration,” or lack thereof, results in many negative emotions from the athlete (Campo, Mackie, & Sanchez, 2019, p. 5). Since it is a new concept to not always win the grand prize, the more loss he experiences leads him to care less about the team’s success or his own. Thus, when he continues to play the sport, he will ultimately become less and less motivated to either work with his teammates or work on his own improvement. This lack of motivation can lead to more injuries on the field in either practice or games, whether that be injury of the entitled athlete or him causing harm to other players because of his feelings.

Children’s sports organizations should recognize that their constant distribution of participation trophies corrupt athletes; especially ones that have played sports their whole lives, incur a career ending injury, and then lose their sense of self-worth. This not only affects their mental health, but it also determines the way they will perceive sports for the rest of their lives. According to Prentice (2017), psychological traits such as being a risk taker, reserved, detached, tender-minded, apprehensive, overprotective, and easily distracted predispose athletes to injury. Many of these traits can be tied to either entitlement or a lack of motivation rooted in their misconceptions about winning because of their childhood. There are variations of severity in injuries, and each kind of injury has its own rehabilitation process length that predicts how an athlete will react. Although all injuries give players the initial feeling of either shock, anger, fear, or frustration, it is their reaction to rehabilitation and return to play that has the most impact on their mental state. Short term injuries are the least overwhelming and come with impatience from the athlete, but the athlete is still optimistic and eager to return to their teammates. In longer lasting or recurring injuries, athletes are a little less motivated in the rehabilitation process, because they begin to develop irrational thoughts and alienate themselves. If the injury begins to improve, however, they can begin to accept their injury and acknowledge what it takes to get back onto the playing field (Prentice, 2017). Alternatively, if that chronic injury never heals, or an athlete experiences a complete career ending injury, then this athlete will lose their athletic identity. An athletic identity is what an athlete creates for him or herself over the years that they play sports. Children’s sports organizations’ everyone is a winner rule is what creates this identity in the first place. With career ending injuries, not only does the athlete begin to isolate himself from teammates, because he feels like he no longer fits in, but “being distanced from the competition due to an injury mean[s]” they can also begin to fall into depression; this will cause them to isolate themselves from the rest of the world as well (Campo, Mackie, & Sanchez, 2019, p. 5). The athlete’s psychological stability is essential in sports and cannot be pure if they never learn to lose. Thus, to avoid an athlete showing entitlement, lack of motivation, careless efforts on the field, a risk of serious injury, and psychological turmoil, these organizations should stop encouraging the use of participation trophies.

Playing well does not mean one always has to win the grand prize, rather playing well means taking care of oneself on and off the field to avoid immodesty and injury. As J. Fader, (2014) states, “we’re more committed to an activity when we do it out of passion, rather then an external reward such as a trophy.” Rewarding athletes for losing can be detrimental to a child’s future and how they cope with losing. However, if people praise a child for their hard work, then they will learn it is better to improve themselves than continue to get the pity trophies (Fader, 2014). Furthermore, it will change their entire mentality on the field by making them more focused and team driven. The more compelled they are to correct their mistakes, the less mistakes they will make, and the less injuries they will experience in their time as an athlete. Keeping children safe is the ultimate goal of parents, coaches, and Athletic Trainers. So, children’s sports organizations should take this proposal of no participation trophies into serious consideration.

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