

# What Does Winning Look Like?

By Jason Kelly

We all agree that winning can be fun. It feels good and for the most part when we win everything seems to go according to plan. There are times, however, when the scoreboard may show that we scored fewer runs than the other team, or that we may not have made every pitch with pinpoint accuracy. Sometimes we can do everything right and still end up with an “L” in the loss column. The truth is, when looking at the scoreboard, sometimes you win and sometimes you lose. Especially when your team is formed with kids.

The question then remains, “What does winning look like?” When working with kids who play sports and athletics, where should we focus our attention and efforts? What should we prepare our practices to look like? How should we act when we win? What do we want other teams and communities to remember about us when we leave their complex?

As a case in point, a good friend of mine asked, on the first day of the 2009 Major League Baseball season, “Who won the World Series last year?” Not only did he forget who came in second, but he couldn’t remember who came in first. We couldn’t even remember who won the Super Bowl. The last game of the 2009 NCAA tournament just ended days ago...do you remember who won?

Some of us might remember every minute of every game ever played. We might remember stats, averages, percentages etc. But for the most part, a lot of us won’t. The part we will remember is when our favorite player stopped for a brief second and signed his autograph. We will remember what he said during an interview. We will remember how he praised his teammates for a game well played. Most likely, when our playing days are over, we will remember how much fun was had at the hotel with teammates and friends.

Several years ago during a Troy Aikman interview, he was asked if he was disappointed in the fact that they lost a close game in the NFC Championships. He responded by saying, “My dad taught me that no matter the outcome on the scoreboard, as long as I gave my all and did what I could for the team, that I should be satisfied.” As a Hall of Fame professional athlete, he was paid to win. But sometimes no matter what we do on the field, we get beat.

Therefore, I’d like to challenge the question (What does winning look like?) with this as an answer; when our playing days are over **effort and attitude are the only outcomes that really matter**. Work ethic, humility, tenacity, perseverance commitment, loyalty (many values could be listed here) and a deep and genuine respect for the game and all who are involved is what winning really looks like. After we are done playing, we may remember a few games and stats, but for the most part, athletes are remembered for what they did as a person.

Winning also consists of a focus on the future. The Viper Baseball Program encourages an attitude of never giving up, dealing with adversity, maintaining maximum effort, lifelong learning, respecting the game, respecting the opponent and even showing grace to the umpire (which is even hard when winning).

As a member of the Viper Baseball Program, athletes will have many opportunities to win and/or lose. But the ultimate goal of the program is long-term. Whether we win a game by many runs or lose by only a few, what happens today may be a determining factor in helping our athletes accomplish goals that they may not even have yet in place (again, a focus on the future). We say this because we believe that we can learn a lesson from every occurrence on the field and apply the knowledge to the next opportunity. That is what winning looks like. The goal isn’t necessarily to win *just at baseball*.

The Vipers attempt to dwell very little on past events. If we miss a pitch, or opportunity in the field, we will productively adjust for the next situation. We attempt to play this game to have fun and make an effort to do our best during every pitch – one pitch at a time.

The willingness to learn, a paradigm shift for some, is what gives us a chance to excel because we remove the outcome from the person. Meaning that no matter how many hits or strike outs we end up with at the end of the day or how many plays or errors are made, our boys can be judged by their effort and attitude. They can be judged by their willingness to persevere. They can be judged by the positive impact they make while in the dugout. They can be judged by how they handle success and adversity. They can be judged by their ability to come back tomorrow and the next day and the day after that.

It is not easy to play the game of baseball. This game allows only a small number of the greatest players of all time (at the highest levels) to fail 70% at the plate, or more, and still be considered great. Through the course of a season, while **playing** a game that is very hard to **play** we encourage our boys to learn from each and every opportunity.

Developmentally, it is important to realize that kids can be at different stages during their growth. As an example, 12 year olds have a tendency to be black or white at this age and will tend to associate an error, strikeout or loss with themselves as a person. The same goes for when they get a hit, make a great play or drive in a run. 12 year olds will think “I am bad because I struck out” or “I am good because I got a hit.”

12 year olds are also growing physically, psychologically, and emotionally at different rates. As an example, a 12 year old by age, may have older brothers or sisters or younger brothers and sisters, which may assist in the emotional maturity or vice versa. We have all heard stories of the great junior high athlete who was later passed up by his peers as they grew to surpass him physically in their late teens.

As another example, at ages 14 or 15 the average teenager is trying to figure out what it means to establish their independence? They are trying to “be their own person.” Assuming all else is well, this is the perfect age for a young man to face setbacks on the playing field as they get a chance to learn to rely on teammates and adults other than their parents (in this case their coach). This is the time they are allowed to practice mental toughness and maintain control of emotions while on the playing field. They are given more responsibility and roles of leadership and in some cases are able to step up to the challenge while others may not quite be ready.

One thing is for sure, a lot of things are going on in the body and minds of these young boys. Whether they are 10 years old, both emotionally and physically or 15 years old and not quite fully developed for their age, baseball, which may seem simple at times, may be more difficult than ever. And the game may be difficult not only because of who is pitching or how hard the ball was hit, but mainly because...well...they are still kids.

As you know, we as adults can help them through this potentially trying time. Adults can help by letting them express their feelings without providing too much feedback right away. We don't always have to give the “right” answer. We just need to consistently show them that we are in support of them in every situation and act as if we have seen it before (which is easier said than done...so don't feel bad if it is hard to do).

How can you help right away? Bring them to the next Viper practice and say...**“Work Hard at Having Fun!”** (which is a Viper motto) And if you aren't quite sure what to say about what happened in the game, how to adjust a swing, or field a ground ball, or track down a ball hit in the gap, just give them a hug and encourage them to talk to their coach. Our coaches love to teach.

If they come home and say that the coach said this or did that, or that their teammates said that or did this, use it as a learning experience. Give them an opportunity to solve the problem on their own. In the Viper program our coaches are aware of the difficulties that some of our kids may face and are willing to spend the time teaching.

Sometimes the words or actions of a teammate or coach can be perceived differently by different people and for good reasons. As an example, a coach may make a pitching change for safety and concern of the pitchers arm. An athlete, on the other hand, may perceive the change for different reasons.

If you, as parents, feel, nervous, scared, anxious, excited, happy, angry, frustrated, confused, joyful...fill in the blank...you too are normal. What the Viper coaches try to do (who may FEEL the same way as the kids or parents during a particular moment in a game) is act as if we have seen it before; whether it is a great play or something we need to work on.

Most often, our coaches are thinking through scenarios that can be played out during the next practice that will assist the entire team in learning a lifelong lesson. The boys feed off of that. They may think to themselves, "If my coach is calm and my parents are calm, maybe it's not that big of deal."

We are also looking at their Feet, Hands and Eyes. We call it "Good Feet, Good Hands, Good Eyes". In other words, we are looking at the action and not necessarily the outcome, because in every act is a potential learning opportunity. We don't want to add to the pressure that already exists in the game. We will try not to over-coach from the dugout...or stands...because they have, what seems like, a million things running through their minds already.

When the opportunity arises, the lesson will be taught and eventually learned, but...possibly at different rates. And as our Viper coaches have learned from years of experience, 10, 12, 13, 16, and 18 year olds may not learn the lesson "on time".

Therefore, it is our goal to answer the initial question, "What does winning look like?" with a lifelong approach. Our goal is to show others that, yes we want to win, but winning consists of more than what the scoreboard may show at the end of the day. The answer to the question may not show up tomorrow. In fact, the answer may not show up for many years.

The answer is one we are willing to wait a long time for and may not show up until current Viper Baseball players are teaching their kids how to work hard at their craft and have fun while playing their game. And if that is the end result, more kids playing a great game, taught by great people 15 or 20 years from now...then we will have won a game that really matters.