

Which first: Confidence or success?

Are the attitudes of today's young athletes any different than those of ten years ago, or twenty years ago? If so, what are the differences that you see? And then of course, if they are different, what has caused them to have different attitudes?

One attitudinal difference that is apparent to me is that of confidence. Confidence in self, in one's team and teammates, and in one's coaches seems to change by the day, or perhaps not so dramatically, by the month or the season. Now you're probably wondering what the heck is this guy talking about.

Well, what happens to young athletes when they play on teams that experience difficulty winning with any consistency? What I have witnessed is that today's youth athletes are too easily influenced by failure. A couple bad games and they think their team just isn't very good. That leads to more bad games, of course.

Most athletes and coaches, as well as parents, enter into new athletic seasons filled with optimism. When a team begins the season with success everyone develops more confidence, though today some of that confidence may be perceived as cockiness, and perhaps too much cockiness. On the other hand, early failure often results in a lack of confidence. Many young athletes seem to be at one extreme or the other, and for those of you living with these athletes in your homes it may be apparent that the confidence comes and goes as the wind does.

It seems to me that the attitudes of our athletes today are easily determined by the results of competition. Less and less do we see it the other way around—that is, that pre-existing confidence leads to positive results.

That brings us to a question that we have wondered about for ages: Which comes first, confidence or success?

Some of us who may be considered to be 'old school' in our thinking believe that confidence must come in order for any success to occur. Our children involved in competitive sports very likely take the opposite approach, that if they succeed then they will believe more strongly in themselves.

Some of my first hand observations come from my own experience as a coach. It was always important for me to make a schedule that was extremely challenging, so much so that over the years several people questioned the wisdom of making a schedule that was so difficult. Our non-conference schedule, and thus most of our early season, was spent competing against teams who were clearly more talented than our team was. Victory was usually only accomplished when we played near flawless baseball.

In recent years, our athletes tended to get through that part of the season and enter into conference play with little confidence, and in my opinion the low levels of confidence resulted in sub-par performances and even more losses.

My perception of the athletes of ten to fifteen years ago is much different. It seemed that a decade ago, the athletes approached each new contest with renewed confidence, regardless of the previous day's results. I once had a team that lost its first twenty-two games but still ended the season with twenty-seven victories, which is a very respectable total. I truly believe that those twenty-seven wins were a direct result of athletes who continued to believe in themselves, their teammates and coaches in spite of their early season failures.

Therefore, to go back to the very first paragraph above, why does it seem that today's athletes need success before they develop confidence, and what can we as parents do to help them have confidence regardless of recent struggles or failures?

I think that the development of attitudes starts in the home and is hopefully reinforced by coaches. When our kids come home from a couple losses what messages are we sending them? If they exhibit negative self-talk (regarding themselves or their teams) how do we respond? Are we sending them messages that their teams stink, too? Are we telling them that their teammates have little ability or that their coaches are incompetent, and therefore their team isn't very good?

Or do we tell them to get back out there and give their greatest effort, to believe in themselves and the rest of their team. Do we remind them that losses are only temporary stumbling blocks that will make them better in the long run? Do we let them know that the taste of victory is sweeter after they have experienced tough defeats?

I really believe that parents can be great positive influences for young athletes. The attitudes that they can carry from home into school and athletics are formed at home. Negative talk leads to negative thinking, and negative thinking leads to poor results. On the other hand, positive talk leads to increased belief and confidence, which can certainly help to produce positive results.

There are already enough negative influences in today's world. If we as parents don't help our young athletes develop positive thinking about themselves and the people with whom they compete, then how are they ever going to succeed?