

Are You Winning or Succeeding?

Description

Winning is not everything. It's the only thing.

This is one of the better known quotes in sports, often attributed to coaching legend Vince Lombardi of the NFL's Green Bay Packers. It's possible, if not likely, that [he was misquoted](#), but it remains a common philosophy that permeates our culture.

Contrast that with this favorite poem of coaching legend John Wooden of the UCLA men's basketball program.

Beyond the winning and the goal,
Beyond the glory and the flame,
He feels the flame within his soul,
Born of the spirit of the game.

And where the barriers may wait,
Built up by the opposing Gods,
He finds a thrill in bucking fate
And riding down the endless odds.

Where others wither in the fire,
Or fall below some raw mishap,
Where others lag behind and tire,
Or break beneath the handicap,
He finds a new and deeper thrill
To take him on the uphill spin,
Because the test is greater still
And something he can revel in.
~Grantland Rice, "The Great Competitor"

Let the words sink in a bit. Deep down, which one resonates more strongly?

During his tenure at UCLA, John Wooden established a track record as one of history's most successful coaches. At one point, his teams won 88 consecutive games, not to mention 7 NCAA national championships in a row (and 10 NCAA championships in 12 years).

Despite the enviable success he and his teams enjoyed, winning was something he rarely spoke of. Many

players have remarked upon how he de-emphasized winning, and steered their attention more to doing their best and performing in such a way that they could walk off the court with their heads held high.

As former player Walt Hazzard said, “Before a game, the thing that always impressed me, that could take a lot of pressure off me as a player, was that he never challenged us to win the game. He always challenged us to do the best we could do. To walk into the locker room when the game was over, look in the mirror, and say to myself, Walt Hazzard, I did the best that I could do tonight.”

Winning as a side effect

Unbelievably, Wooden never once scouted an opposing team, but instead devoted his time and meticulous attention to making sure his players were prepared to do their best, rather than worrying about or trying to be better than another team. For instance, at the beginning of every year, he would show the freshmen in exacting detail how he wanted them to put on their socks (so as to prevent blisters).

Did he care about winning? Most certainly he did, but not at the expense of the broader life lessons and philosophies he wanted his players to learn. For Wooden, winning, awards, respect, fame, and all the rest were regarded more as side effects of successful personal growth and development than the primary aim and objective.

Controlling the controllables

Sport psychologists often talk about focusing on process variables, or those ingredients of performance and success that we have control over. This seems to be what Wooden was doing in the way he approached competition and prepared his players.

It's just that this is a difficult adjustment to make when we've been conditioned to focus more on what others think and objective external measures of success like awards, advancing in auditions, glowing reviews in the NY Times, and so on. But all of that comes and goes, and isn't something we can control even if we wanted to.

As Walt Hazzard suggests above, letting go of our attachment to wins and losses, great feedback and poor reviews, great performances and disappointing ones, and focusing only on that which we control instead is extremely liberating. It frees you up to enjoy the entire experience of performing and auditioning so much more. And while it may not happen overnight, it is one of the most valuable lessons I've taken from sport psychology, and is most definitely worth working towards.

Reread that poem above, and see if it starts to resonate more with each reading...

Take action

Time for a bit of self-reflection and evaluation. Consider the habitual thoughts and objectives that drive

your actions on a day to day basis. Are they directed more towards winning? Towards gaining the esteem of others? Meeting another's expectations of us? Beating or outperforming someone else?

Or developing your own personal criteria of success and excellence? Getting a step closer to whom you would love to be in the future? Finding a way to make steady progress towards your personal objectives and goals? In a word, succeeding?

Consider Wooden's own definition of success (emphasis mine): "Success is *peace of mind* which is a direct result of self-satisfaction in knowing you did your best to become the best you are capable of becoming."

Watch [this video of John Wooden](#), where he shares more of his perspective on the difference between winning and succeeding.

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Date Created

September 2012