

Motivation: More than a Question of Winning and Losing

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I once played soccer with a kid named Mark. Mark was always one of his team's better players. Indeed, Mark represented the national schoolboy Under 15 team. About one year later, however, Mark dropped out of soccer. He said that soccer had stopped being fun. He felt he wasn't the best player anymore. It was clear that Mark could only feel successful if he was No 1 and did not want to play if he could not achieve this goal.

This anecdote illustrates how important it is for coaches and parents to understand how their players perceive success in soccer and the significant effects these perceptions may have on the players' motivation to play the game. This includes how hard they try in practice and during games, whether they persist when the going gets tough and whether they practice skills that will help them improve even if they are not presently very good at them.

Research has found that for children under the age of 10, high ability is generally implied by learning or by achieving success at tasks they are uncertain of being able to complete. They do not judge ability with reference to performance norms or social comparisons. They can be induced to adopt another's performance as a standard but normally they make self-referenced rather than social norm-referenced judgments of ability. For young children, when more effort is needed for success, this implies more learning - which means more ability in their world.

In a real sense, effort is ability for children under the age of 11. Because young children cannot differentiate effort from ability, they do not have the cognitive ability to understand winning and losing. If you do not believe me, go watch any Under 9 game and listen to the first question a child asks as he or she comes off the field. If it is not "Where's my snack?" it will be "Did we win?" The child at this age understands that winning is important and loves to compete but does not understand winning and losing in any systematic sense. Because of this, they will not feel sad until a parent or coach informs them that they lost and accompanies this information with a positive or negative emotional reaction.

Around the age of 11 or 12, however, children develop the capacity to differentiate ability from effort and now understand that effort can only help their performance up to their current level of ability. For example, at this age slow players recognise that no matter how hard they try, they will not out-run the fastest player on the team. As a consequence of this developmental change, after the age of 11 or 12, individuals can choose to define success in two ways: in a childlike fashion in which improvement and effort are critical, or in a more adult way in which out-performing others is stressed. These different ways of perceiving success manifest themselves in individuals as task-or-ego orientation.

Ego-oriented individuals perceive success in terms of winning and out-performing others and believe that if they out-perform someone with minimum effort they have demonstrated an even higher level of perceived ability. These individuals believe that success is determined by ability; cheating and deception may be acceptable behaviours if they enable them to achieve their goal of winning.

In contrast, task-oriented individuals perceive success in terms of getting better trying hard. Research has demonstrated that task-oriented individuals will remain motivated even in times of adversity, for example, when they are losing, because they perceive success in terms of trying hard and attempting to improve. For example, the centre forward who misses a few chances will continue to run into space in the attacking third of the field and accept the responsibility of taking shots at goal.

Ego-oriented individuals who are successful are likely to engage in the same positive behaviours. However, when ego-oriented individuals begin to doubt their ability, they are likely to begin to withdraw effort and engage in negative behaviours to protect their perceived soccer ability. For example, you may find ego-oriented forwards drifting further and further back after they have missed a few chances. They may explain this by stating that they want to "create from the back", or begin to blame their teammates for their inability to get the ball to them in the attacking third of the field.

Although this behaviour may seem illogical to you, it makes perfect sense to the player because they are attempting to preserve their now-fragile perception of ability. After a while, it could be that these ego-oriented individuals who doubt their perceived ability, much like my friend Mark, choose to drop out of soccer all together. They do so because soccer no longer provides them the opportunity to feel successful and they do not achieve their goal of being the best compared to others.

In an activity in which performance during childhood and early adolescence is so closely linked to physiological, motor skill, cognitive and other psycho-social developmental issues, it seems sensible to promote task orientation.

Small children who struggle to compete against their bigger, quicker peers may choose to drop out of soccer prematurely if winning is the only way they can feel successful. In addition, task orientation should be fostered with those children who are currently top age-group performers.

Why is this important? As in other activities, children move from one soccer team to another, from one competitive level to another and from one age group to another. When this occurs, it is unlikely that the hierarchy of ability will remain constant. In such instances, if the demonstration of ability is continually based on the comparison of ability to others, an individual's perception of high ability may weaken. This may lead to maladaptive behaviours, including, potentially, withdrawal from the game. From a motivational perspective, therefore, it is important that parents and coaches attempt to promote task-orientation in our young players.

By providing ways of defining success other than winning, we can ensure that our players remain motivated throughout their soccer career. Research with elite-level athletes has shown that these individuals are high in both ego and task orientation. They feel successful when they win and outperform their competitors, but they also appreciate the fact that this may not always be possible.

There may be occasions when they lose and/or