

Thursday, March 5, 2009

When the 'Bad Guys' Win?

By Aaron Nelson

At a [PACT](#) (Parents and Coaches Together) presentation last year, one of the parents asked a very pointed question: "Why do the bad guys always win?" It was a difficult question, one which kept PACT presenters discussing possible answers for over a year.

First, it's important to define who the "bad guys" of the question are. To keep it simple, let's define "bad guys" as people who exhibit unfavorable behavior before, during, or after a match. For example: cheating, gamesmanship, and ego-centered behavior; basically any un-PACT-like behavior.

Next, we must consider, do the bad guys *really* always win? Surely, they cannot win every game. If they don't *always* win, why does it feel like they do?

Maybe, it just feels worse because the losing is compounded by a feeling of unfairness or injustice. Perhaps it is just natural to feel entitled to be rewarded when you do everything right; and the most easily identifiable and tangible reward is a win.

But just because the score is an easy way to measure the game, it doesn't mean we need to limit the definition of winning to which team scored the most.

Winning should be considered both in the short term and over the long term, on the field and off the field. The difficulty with the question of why the "bad guys" win is because it assumes that the only value in competition is in winning that game, when in fact the entire process of competition has value; there is even value in losing.

Perhaps the fundamental question that is really being asked is: why should we encourage our kids to behave like champions when the other side doesn't do the same? As parents it can be very frustrating to watch others allow their kids to behave badly, or even encourage it, while we spend energy instilling positive behavior in our own kids.

When the "bad guys" win, it is easy to wonder why we should even bother with playing like a champion. However, in the midst of this frustration, we have a great opportunity to ask our children why they play. What is more important to your child: to win or to play? Research shows that kids play to have fun, to compete and to be social. While they naturally play to win, and winning obviously matters, ask yourself and your child: how *much* does it really matter?

PACT promotes a champion-centered belief system in which the value of competing is in the process, not the result. Champion-centered athletes strive to win in the right way, not just to win.

Champion-centered athletes play for the sake of playing, not just to win. Champion-centered athletes enjoy the game, not just the final score. PACT also reminds us that these champion centered beliefs don't just happen; an environment which encourages kids to play like a champion needs to be created and nurtured by the adults.

Instilling champion-centered behavior, however, does not guarantee that our children will win. Sometimes the other teams win. Sometimes those other teams are made up of kids who behave badly, the "bad guys."

So why should we continue to teach our kids to play like a champion? Why continue to encourage positive behaviors? As parents deeply involved in our children's lives it requires a great deal of vision, belief and patience to model champion behavior.

We continue because this competitive, adult-created environment is often our children's first opportunity to make difficult choices; including moral choices. They get the opportunity to decide how they will respond in the heat of competition; they get the opportunity to decide how to react to a perceived injustice; they get the opportunity to decide whether they will do what is best for them, do what is expected, or do what is right and good.

They get the opportunity to decide how much winning matters and how they will react when the "bad guys" win. They will make some good choices and undoubtedly some bad choices. As parents, it is one of our first opportunities to not only help guide our children toward the right choices, but perhaps our greatest opportunity to model the right choices and the right behavior.

Our children watch and learn how we deal with disappointment. When they experience defeat, it is our opportunity to show them how to deal with adversity. As parents we can use both "losing" and "winning" to model and discuss two other qualities of a champion: persistence and resiliency.

The famous poet Rudyard Kipling said in his poem "If":

If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
And treat those two imposters just the same ...
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it.

So, what behavior will you model when the "bad guys" win? Will you treat the imposters Triumph and Disaster just the same?

The discussion you have with your child about why they play, about winning and losing, and the behavior you model will undoubtedly be more important than any answer you give or receive.

(*Aaron Nelson* serves as the Development Director for [Minnesota Youth Soccer Association](#), has been a longtime a volunteer youth soccer coach, and is the parent of two girls who occasionally play the beautiful game. When not engaged in soccer he spends his time as a trial lawyer at Doar, Drill and Skow, S.C. in New Richmond, Wisconsin.)

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