Should Everyone Get a Trophy? -- 2/21/18

By the time they reach high school, most kids have received dozens of sports awards: trophies for competing in Little League, medals for playing on soccer teams, and ribbons for taking part in gymnastics. But instead of recognizing just the top performers, many sports programs have started awarding trophies to all athletes, regardless of their performance.

Some people say giving everyone a trophy encourages young people to keep playing sports even if they’re not superstars. But others say that sends the wrong message and fails to reward hard work. Two experts weigh in on whether everyone should go home with a trophy.

YES

Everyone on a team should get a trophy regardless of whether the team came in first or dead last. That’s because participation trophies help young people celebrate a time when they learned new skills, had fun with their teammates, and belonged to something bigger than themselves.

Trophies are also a great way to encourage people who aren’t gifted athletes to keep playing—and to reward them for their effort. Research shows that young people who participate in team sports have better social skills and are more physically fit than those who don’t. Playing sports also teaches time management and problem solving—two things that help kids in school and in life. Not to mention, exercise is good for the mind, body, and spirit.

I’ve seen firsthand how powerful getting a participation trophy can be. Recently, a group of young men who once played on a baseball team I coached visited me. Each had brought along the tiny trophies they received at the end of the season. It was clear how much they valued them. Together we laughed about failed plays and remembered how we managed to squeak into the playoffs. We ended up losing in the first round. But that didn’t matter. For most of those young men, it was the first time they’d been part of a team, and they looked back on the experience—and their trophies—fondly.

Competition is certainly an important part of sports—as is learning to win and lose gracefully. But winning isn’t everything. For everyone who plays, the reward also comes in the form of self-confidence, sportsmanship, and teamwork. That’s why all participants who show up at practices, work hard to improve their skills, play in games, and support their teammates deserve a keepsake of their experience.

 NO

We spend an estimated $3 billion on trophies every year in the United States and Canada. For that same amount, we could buy every kid in the U.S. four soccer balls or three books. Every public school in the country could get 122 Chromebooks. Instead, we spend all that money on trophies, which aren’t even important.

What is important is for young people to learn that it’s OK to make mistakes and that losing is no big deal. In fact, some Olympic gold medalists have said that losing was the best thing that happened to them, because it motivated them to work much harder the next time.

Meanwhile, scientists who study praise and rewards have discovered that children who are overpraised by adults start expecting rewards for everything they do—even if they didn’t do anything to deserve them. Some kids even cheat or lie to make sure the approval continues. Researchers have also found that when kids constantly get praise, some of them become overly confident and arrogant.

We often say, “It doesn’t matter if you win or lose—it’s how you play the game.” If we truly believe that, why don’t we give a trophy only to the player who was the best athlete overall or who showed the most improvement?

We don’t have to be mean or embarrass those who don’t get trophies. We can just accept that everyone messes up occasionally, and that it takes a long time—and a lot of practice—to master certain skills. That way, when kids finally do receive trophies, they’ll know that they’ve earned them. Until then, kids should participate in sports because they enjoy it—and let that be the reward.