



The Argument for Defeat

by Dan Bauer

0 wins – 27 losses. A feat few coaches would readily admit to if they had ever experienced it. I actually had not thought about it for quite some time. My mind has always had the ability to bury those less than delightful thoughts like Joe Sakic buries a wrist shot into the back of the net.

A young player who has been a participant in my summer hockey program stirred that memory recently. We have all heard of playing shorthanded, but this young man's team has only seven total players, including the goaltender! Having just finished playing our high school game with eleven skaters, I quickly had a new understanding of what a "short bench" really meant. With a hint of regret he informed me that his season hadn't been going too well. Understandable. His mother's eyes told the real story as he described some of their lopsided defeats.

0 and 27 came rushing back like Bobby Orr on a patented end-to-end. I was a first year teacher in Spooner, Wisconsin and assistant high school hockey coach. Within the first month of the season I was pressed into duty as head bantam coach. What better way, I thought, to get my feet wet in a new program. So off I went on a journey across Wisconsin, coaching bantams in Ashland in the morning, Ironwood in the afternoon and back home for a high school game in the evening. Occasionally I was able to squeeze in a mite game to watch my own son play.

The bantam experiment included a young group of players trying to survive in a league they didn't belong. We didn't just lose games; we got pounded like a drum in an ACDC song. We may have actually tied a game or two in that run of 27, but I am certain there were no victories. Ten and fifteen goal margins of defeat were not uncommon. An 18-1 game was a clear revelation that there would be no mercy-rule to spare our feelings. The sympathy we received was much the same as you get when you bounce a check or miss a mortgage payment.

At times that season was as painful as a trip to the dentist. As a much younger man, with an immature perspective on life, I put myself through a lot of personal torture. Losing has always weighed heavily on me no matter what the circumstances. The jacket of blame easily settles upon my shoulders. I wouldn't have it any other way—I always should have done more. Throughout my private guilt trip encompassing those 27 losses I never recall quitting as an option. I also never, for a minute, considered that what we were trying to do was without value. There is far too much evidence to support the indispensable bond between failure and success and the daily lessons we were learning.

There seems to be a belief today that the only valuable athletic experience is one that involves winning. We jump teams, switch associations, stack teams and manipulate schedules so we can be a part of an impressive won-lost record. Instead of creating two equal teams at the top level, we would rather build one strong team and then complain because we have nobody to play who can challenge us. Many believe that if we aren't winning games, we can't be learning anything valuable.

There is little question that winning is the goal and that we all want to win. Even those who want us to believe it is all about "fun" are kidding themselves. When we play for fun, we don't keep score. And other than a few cross-ice mite games, we don't play unless the scoreboard is on. Look and listen to the crowd and the coaches—then tell me we are playing just for "fun". While winning is a great appetizer to confidence, it can also lead to over-stuffed egos, selfishness and arrogance. By most standards, a .500 won-loss record is evidence of a well-balanced schedule.

Losing is an important part of winning. Failure is key to success. What lesson do we teach our kids if we push them to only shoot for goals they are certain to achieve? What value is there in shrinking from challenge to pursue a sure thing? There would have been no "Miracle on Ice" without a man named Herb Brooks, who accepted a challenge that only he believed was achievable. And we would not be living in the "New State of Hockey" without an enthusiastic and positive force named Bob Johnson who dared to rival Minnesota for the chance to be a college hockey power. His influence on a pair of NCAA champion coaches, Mark Johnson and Mike Eaves, was immeasurable.

Both Johnson and Brooks overcame many obstacles, defeats and doubters to achieve what most believed were impossible. Defeat motivated them, pushed them to work harder, drove them to change the game and to motivate young men to get up and try one more time.

There is great reward and in time a sense of satisfaction in laying it all on the line—and coming up short. Far too many people never take that chance. I would rather feel that enormous pain in a season ending lockerroom than to never have tried at all. The pain of defeat is as emotional and motivating as the joy of victory.

Memories of that fateful season may have been suppressed, but the lessons are not. While losing games, and especially 27 of them in one year, was not pleasant, it was most assuredly worthwhile. I would not trade away that season or the lessons I learned. Every loss holds within it a lesson to be learned. Good coaches find that lesson and make sure their teams understand its importance. Others simply toss up their hands, rant and rave at their team and fail to find any value in the loss. In the process those coaches lose out on a great opportunity to model character, build their team unity and teach a valuable life lesson.

That lesson is the simple, but realistic fact that sometimes life is hard. And at that particular time I thought life was real hard. Little did I realize that a 27-loss season was going to be nothing compared to what lies ahead. Standing by a friend as he goes through a divorce is tough. Taking the family pet to the vet for the last time doesn't compare to losing a game. Watching your parents cry as they bury their parents or your wife cry as she buries her mother will be harder. Those losses couldn't hold a candle to watching your premature newborn twin daughters lying in ICU incubators. Unfortunately for most of us, this is a special perspective that can only be achieved through experience and age.

While losing games does not compare with any of life's true hardships, they do help you prepare for them. You learn that life doesn't always go your way and that you won't in every

circumstance rise to the occasion. It trains you to take on setbacks and get up one more time to try again. 27 times we got up and tried again. In life you will have to recover from far more than 27 failures. Discovering that failure is not permanent and that perseverance is the key to success is an essential life lesson that athletics provides. The scale of the obstacles increases, and our perspective is constantly changing, but the solution remains the same. Try again.

There is a happy ending to this story. We ended that fateful season with a three game tournament. We won two of the three games in that tournament and believed right then that our season, of only two wins, was indeed a success. We knew that our season-long losing streak had not been in vain. And my twin daughters also survived their hasty entry into this world and are now the newest hockey-playing Bauer's. As I have been told numerous times, those things in life worth having don't come easy or without a price.

Indeed life is filled with many hardships, but when I see the smiles of my twins peering out from behind their hockey masks, life is good. And for my young friend with the short bench, there will also be future success spawned from the tough times he now endures.

Show me a good loser and I will show you someone who has matured enough to understand that the value of athletics goes far beyond wins and loses. You will find someone who is having a character building athletic experience. Show me a bad loser and I will show you a shortsighted, selfish and immature person that narrowly and mistakenly defines success only on the scoreboard.

And for that—there is no excuse, nor argument.

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