

Everyone wants what's best for their kid, but no one knows what that is. It might be succeeding, but it might be failing. It might be winning, but it might be losing.

A lot of us who played youth sports remember the defeats far more clearly than the victories—the camaraderie of the locker room, how sweet a candy bar tastes amid bitterness, the foxhole fraternity. You just don't bond with teammates after a win like you do after a loss. That's when you learn to express and accept empathy. Even fans of pro teams look back on the losing streaks as a time of testing, a crucible from which the team and its nation of supporters emerge smaller but stronger. Without the wilderness, there is no paradise.

The Tampa Bay Buccaneers had a run of 26 straight losses through the 1976 and 1977 NFL seasons. The fans who stuck with them will be fans forever. The Baltimore Orioles started the 1988 baseball season with 21 straight losses, and a local radio broadcaster vowed to stay on the air continuously until they finally won. After LeBron James took his talents to Miami in 2010, the Cleveland Cavaliers suffered 26 straight losses. That's what distinguishes Cleveland—not LeBron's return and the championship that followed but the poise the faithful showed in the dark time. Anyone can be graceful in victory. It takes an aristocrat to keep it together when the walls cave in.

I've relearned this truth as a member of that most pitied and envied of species, the hockey parent. In the course of this second career, I have served as coach and air horn blower, chant leader, heckler and postgame pep talker while watching my son ascend from Mite to Bantam, House League to Travel.

In his third season in 2013, my son's team of 9- and 10-year-olds never lost more than three straight games, won a gold medal at a faux Olympics in Lake Placid—*Miracle on Ice!*—and made a deep run in the Connecticut State Championship. There was happiness and buffoonery, boasting, celebration, pizza. In short, it was a typically good youth hockey season. He improved as a player but did not much change as a person.

For that, you need to lose, which is what happened the next year, when his team of Fairfield County 11- and 12-year-olds added its story to the legends of sporting ineptitude. Not merely weak but picturesquely bad, this team lost 40 of their first 50 games, most of the defeats coming in the course of two losing streaks, which, in the way of major chords and minor chords, parents referred to as the big streak and the little streak. The little streak, which stretched 12 games, ran from September till November. The big streak, which stretched 22 games, ran from January till early March.

Take out your Fodor's Connecticut and look at the index of towns. We lost in all of them: the icebox known as Wonderland in Bridgeport; the beautiful outdoor ice sheet in New Canaan; the architect Eero Saarinen's modern masterpiece, known as the "Whale," in New Haven. Prep school rinks, too—the Guntery, Choate, which, when we blew a late lead, parents



What Kids Can Learn From Losing

A hockey dad reflects on the long streak of losses that reinforced his son's love of the game and turned his team into winners.

took to calling Choke. Some of our defeats came in close games. Others in blowouts. Some were low scoring. Watching the scoreboard at others was like tuning into the Jerry Lewis telethon.

For a time, I worried that these streaks would kill my child's love of the game, that he'd become frustrated and feign illness, that he'd come to hate hockey and quit.

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Or worse, that he'd develop an inferiority complex, that the expectation of defeat would follow him from the ice to other parts of his life—playground, classroom—that he'd be bullied by kids half his age or would start picking fights just to take a beating, as that would be the only way he knew how to interact.

But that's not what happened. As bad as it got, the losing was clarifying. It weeded out the kids who were in it less for the game than the glory, leaving just the diehards behind. What started as a roster of 17 was culled down to 12 by January. It was especially edifying for my kid. It taught him a great truth of the world: For every-

one good, there is someone better. For everything big, there is something bigger.

In this way, he learned humility. And, by giving up even the prospect of victory, he remembered what it was that he'd loved about the game in the first place. It wasn't the ribbons or trophies but the speed, the sound of blades on ice, passing and shooting, physical contact, the smell of the compressors, the Zamboni, the drives to and from games with friends and parents, the way that, by exhausting your body, you free your soul.

The losing separated true players from what my Grandma Esther called "show ponies." In the try-outs that set rosters, coaches and evaluators measure all the things that can be measured—size, speed, form. That is, they measure everything but what really counts: who loves hockey and plays it like they love it and will not quit no matter the circumstance. Sitting through the defeats, watching as some kids redoubled their effort while others gave up, I kept thinking of something that Doug Plank, the Chicago Bears safety, told me when I was writing a book about the team: "If you put on a tape and watch a player and cannot tell from the way he plays whether his team is ahead or behind—that's who you want."

What's more, the kids were learning the game in a way that only losing can teach. Because tinkering was the order of the day, each player got to play everywhere, to learn and appreciate the

role of every position on the ice. They kept an eye on their opponents too, studying and incorporating the tricks of success. In an effort to break the streak, they went back to basics, accepted the wisdom of the hockey ancients: A mediocre team that plays like a team defeats a collection of all-stars; a goal is merely the residual result of many small, unappreciated tasks; a strong pass beats a fast skater every time.

It took only a few key moves to right the team—he goes to defense, she takes the face-offs, that kid in goal. In mid-March, when, with 30 games left to play, they began to win, they did it as a different kind of group. When they'd won before, it had been with individual performance. When ahead, they'd coast. When behind, they'd quit.

This new team had character and could never be counted out, no matter the score. They had learned the most important lesson: You can lose without being beaten. They squeaked into the state tournament, then made it all the way to the final, where the winner was decided in overtime. When they lost that game and went into the handshake line, it was not as runners-up but as a team that had been made into winners in the only way that will stick—by losing.

This essay is adapted from Mr. Cohen's new book, "Pee Wees: Confessions of a Hockey Parent," which will be published next week by Farrar, Straus and Giroux.