

Winning at School Carnivals

As we prepare for another season of school carnivals and children's sports I've had the opportunity to hear from a number of parents and reflect on the way carnivals are run, not only at Serpentine but across all schools I've worked in.

Over the last couple of years we have made a number of changes to the way our carnivals operate, but the most controversial seems to be having students now competing in age groups instead of year levels. There have been a number of reasons for this, including aligning with the other schools in our association, for contrary to popular opinion we are not the only school that does this. Many smaller schools and the vast majority of rural schools operate this way and far and away the most compelling reason for doing so is the desire to increase the level of competition and challenge for students. Under the old model some age groups would have had fewer than 10 students to compete against. In situations like this the outcome of the events are pretty much known before the races have even been run and handing out medallions all over the place devalues them and the level of effort required to win one. If too many people get one, they are not special and we leave little to aspire to. In their article ***The Role Of Winning In Youth Sports***, published by Rutgers University, they write that winning only builds confidence when that winning represents a true accomplishment. (ie. I've beaten a worthy opponent). However, winning against other teams or individuals of much lower skill levels normally does little to bolster self-confidence.

It seems to me that we are too concerned these days with kids winning and not focused enough on preparing for the challenge and teaching them to gracefully accept the result. The focus in competition should always be on personal growth and self improvement. If we focus our attention and effort less on the results we're hoping for and more on the processes and techniques we use, we will learn faster, become more successful, and be happier with the outcome. By default we tend to be forward-looking, goal-pursuing, results-focused, because results are easier to measure and evaluate than progress and because we know others judge us based on results and we tend to care too much what others think. But focusing on process and progress rather than outcome is a much better strategy. Why?

- It eliminates the noise of external factors. Success can follow a flawed effort and failure can follow a flawless effort. In those cases, judging performance by outcome will reinforce the wrong idea.
- It encourages experimentation. When you're wholly focused on a specific desired result, you're less willing to try long shots, less inclined to experiment, less open to serendipity, and less likely to stumble on an even better outcome than the one you were aiming for.
- It puts you in control. You have only partial control over whether you reach a specific external goal or win a contest but you have complete control over the process you use. Whether you give your best effort is entirely within your power. An internal locus of control leads to empowerment, higher self-esteem and success, all of which contribute meaningfully to life satisfaction.
- It lets you enjoy and benefit more from whatever outcome does occur. In the long run things rarely turn out the way we expect them to. If your happiness is predicated on your success, and if your success is predicated on a specific outcome, you are setting yourself up for a high likelihood of frustration and disappointment. It's fine to desire a certain outcome; just don't make your happiness contingent on it. Instead, derive happiness from knowing that you gave every attempt your best effort.
- It will give you confidence. Not confidence that you'll succeed in the current attempt, but confidence that you're on the right path to mastery. You'll worry less about the future because you'll know that you'll be happy regardless of the outcome of any given situation or event. You'll be more free to get out of your comfort zone, to be spontaneous and take risks. And being unattached to a specific outcome means you won't be needy, or get upset when things don't go as you had hoped. The more you focus on process over outcome, the more confident you'll become, and there's nothing more attractive than confidence.

There is also a need here to acknowledge Miss Dowson and the effect she has had on our students developing not only their abilities but also their attitudes towards sports to reflect this idea. Our kids are now setting their sights higher and looking forward to the challenge of competing with a focus on achieving their personal best. Many students are regularly attending running club and pushing

themselves and others to improve and have embraced the challenge of competing against older students, relishing the opportunity to compete with older students. They understand that progress demands effort and that to perform at a higher level requires training and dedication. We need to be sending this message to our students in all aspects of life. Failure and disappointment are not dirty words, they are where the most learning and growth takes place and we need to give opportunities to students to experience them in a safe and supportive environment.

I have included below a link to an article from parenting expert Michael Grose entitled Why Finishing 4th Beats Winning which I hope will illustrate this point.

<https://www.parentingideas.com.au/2017/11/finishing-4th-beats-winning/>