

It's How We Play the Game

Have you heard the expression "winning is everything." One of the headlines in the sports section this week stated "Steinbrenner dead at age 80." Steinbrenner who for more than 30-years was owner of the New York Yankees, was fond of saying "Winning is the most important thing in my life after breathing....Breathing first, winning next."

Many times in today's world like Steinbrenner, we place a high demand on our children and ourselves to win, to succeed at any cost, and to be number one.

Being competitive and striving to do your best is a good quality to have. Sometimes in life we need to look not at the final score, but how we played the game.

Back some years ago a father gave a speech at a fundraising dinner for a school that serves learning-disabled children that will never be forgotten by all who attended.

After thanking the school and its dedicated staff, he offered this question: "When not interfered with by outside influences, everything nature does is done with perfection. Yet my son Shay cannot learn things as other children do. He cannot understand things as other children do. Where is the natural order of things in my son?" The father continued by saying he believed that when a child like his, physically and mentally handicapped comes into the world, an opportunity to realize true human nature presents itself, and it comes in the way other people treat that child.

Then he told this amazing story:

Shay and his father had walked past a park where some boys Shay knew were playing baseball. Shay asked, "Do you think they'll let me play?" Shay's father knew that most of the boys would not want someone like Shay on their team, but the father also understood that if his son were allowed to play, it would give him a much-needed sense of belonging and some confidence to be accepted by others in spite of his handicaps.

Shay's father approached one of the boys on the field and asked if Shay could play. The boy looked around for guidance and said, "We're losing by six runs and the game is in the eighth inning. I guess he can be on our team and we'll try to put him in to bat in the ninth inning."

Shay struggled over to the team's bench and, with a broad smile, put on a team shirt. His father watched with a small tear in his eye and warmth in his heart. The boys saw the father's joy at his son being accepted. In the bottom of the eighth inning, Shay's Team scored a few runs but was still behind by three. In the top of the ninth inning, Shay put on a glove and played in the right field. Even though no hits came his way, he was obviously ecstatic just to be in the game and on the field, grinning from ear to ear as his father waved to him from the stands. In the bottom of the ninth inning, Shay's team scored again. Now, with two outs and the bases loaded, the potential winning run was on base and Shay was scheduled to be next at bat.

At this juncture, do they let Shay bat and give away their chance to win the game? Surprisingly, Shay was given the bat. Everyone knew that a hit was all but impossible because Shay didn't even know how to hold the bat properly, much less connect with the ball.

However, as Shay stepped up to the plate, the pitcher, recognizing that the other team was putting winning aside for this moment, moved in a few steps to lob the ball in softly so Shay could at least make contact. The first pitch came and Shay swung clumsily and missed. The pitcher again took a few steps forward to toss the ball softly towards Shay. As the pitch came in, Shay swung at the ball and hit a slow ground ball right back to the pitcher.

The game would now be over. The pitcher picked up the soft grounder and could have easily thrown the ball to the first baseman. Shay would have been out and that would have been the end of the game. Instead, the pitcher threw the ball right over the first baseman's head, out of reach of all team mates.

Everyone from the stands and both teams started yelling, "Shay, run to first! Run to first!" Never in his life had Shay ever run that far, but he made it to first base. He scampered down the baseline, wide-eyed and startled.

Everyone yelled, "Run to second, run to second!" Catching his breath, Shay awkwardly ran towards second, gleaming and struggling to make it to the base. By the time Shay rounded towards second base, the right fielder had the ball ... the smallest guy on their team who now had his first chance to be the hero for his team. He could have thrown the ball to the second-baseman for the tag, but he understood the pitcher's intentions so he, too, intentionally threw the ball high and far over the third-baseman's head. Shay ran toward third base deliriously as the runners ahead of him circled the bases toward home.

All were screaming, "Shay, Shay, Shay, all the Way Shay"

Shay reached third base because the opposing shortstop ran to help him by turning him in the direction of third base, and shouted, "Run to third! Shay, run to third!"

As Shay rounded third, the boys from both teams, and the spectators, were on their feet screaming, "Shay, run home! Run home!" Shay ran to home, stepped on the plate, and was cheered as the hero who hit the grand slam and won the game for his team.

That day the boys from both teams helped bring a piece of true love and humanity into this world and taught a bigger lesson of life, winning is one thing, but its how we play the game and treat each other that in the end really matters.

Doug Hovatter is a WVU Associate Professor and 4-H Agent in Berkeley County. He can be reached at 304 264-1936, Doug.Hovatter@Mail.WVU.edu or on the web at <http://berkeleyextension.com>