

Celebrating Adversity in High School Sports

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Throughout the world of sports, athletes, coaches, and fans dream of perfection. We idolize pitchers who throw the elusive “perfect game” in baseball. We held our breath last year as we watched the Patriots embark on a journey to complete the “perfect season.” Even our clichés stress perfection, as we tell our kids “practice makes perfect.”

As a teacher and coach, I am not immune to the lure of perfection. I love when my students “ace” an exam or play “mistake-free” hockey. I share in their grief when they do not get into a college or lose a big game.

Perhaps we often strive for perfection in order to minimize adversity in the classroom and sports. The less our children struggle, the better.

However, my fascination with perfection and fear of adversity quickly changed after I attended a CHS coaches workshop with Greg Dale, sports psychologist from Duke University. He made me think, and more importantly, *reflect on* my coaching. After our workshop, I had a much clearer understanding of why I coach high school athletics.

Through sports, we have an awesome opportunity to teach our children how to overcome life’s challenges and obstacles. Where else can a child experience the thrill of coming from behind to tie a hockey game, only to lose the lead minutes or even seconds later? A key three pointer may very easily be followed up by a costly turnover. How often have we watched a quarterback make a great pass, only to throw an interception on the ensuing play?

Unfortunately, as a coach, player and fan, I often fear these moments and even at times lose my cool and focus when my team struggles. For years, the message that I sent (and sometimes continue to send) to my players through my words and body language is that we must strive for perfection and do our best to avoid adversity. Get the first goal. Protect the lead. Avoid mistakes. It has taken me many years to realize that success in sports and in life requires a new approach to dealing with adversity.

These moments of adversity cannot be avoided, and thus, should not be feared. High school sports are full of the highest of highs and the lowest of lows. Dr. Dale taught me that the best way (or perhaps the only way) for a team to deal with adversity is to see it not as a hindrance, but as an opportunity. Adversity is an opportunity to both build character and reveal character. It is an opportunity to learn how to confront the obstacles that sports throw at you, maintain your composure, and understand that you have the ability to overcome these challenges.

High school sports are an extension of the classroom in many ways. However, over the past six years of coaching at Canton High School, my colleagues and players have taught me that high school athletics provides a wonderful opportunity for our children to learn how to deal with adversity. As in sports, adversity is inevitable in life. It is how we deal with this adversity that defines much of who we are as people.