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Learning how to lose with integrity

When two teams face each other on the field, only one team can be declared a winner. That's just how sports work. In a perfectly equal world we would all win as much as we lose, but in reality some teams might win more than they lose, and some might lose more than they win. But no matter how many times you lose, it's important that you as a youth athlete learn how to handle a loss with integrity and grace.

Here are four things youth athletes need to know about losing with integrity:

1. Don't trash talk the opposing team.

Yes, losing stinks. No matter if it was a total blowout or a really close game (you all watched the Super Bowl this year, right?), no one likes to lose. But trash talking the other team isn't going to change the final score. And while it might feel good to vent, save your frustrations for when you are back on the team bus or in the car with your parents. Nothing makes a player look more like a sore loser than when you trash talk the opponents within earshot. Tearing them down isn't going to make you play any better next time and it just makes you look bad.

2. Don't trash talk your teammates.

We all make mistakes. And sometimes those mistakes can cost your team the game. A dropped pass, a bad throw, an easy goal missed—a few little mistakes can be enough to tip the scales, especially if the two teams are evenly matched. But if your teammate made a mistake that gave the other team an edge in the game, ripping them to pieces afterwards isn't going to make any difference. It could even damage the relationship you have with your teammate! Think about how bad you feel when you make a mistake; your

teammate feels exactly the same way and rubbing it in won't make the score change. Your job as a good teammate is to support your team, no matter what. And while supporting someone when they make an amazing play is easy, supporting them when they made a mistake is even more important.

As legendary basketball coach John Wooden pointed out, "...never criticize a teammate. I didn't want that. I used to tell them I was paid to do that. That's my job. I'm paid to do it. Pitifully poor, but I am paid to do it."

3. Shake hands with everyone.

In 2013, the Kentucky High School Athletic Association issued a very odd directive: ***no more postgame handshakes***. Citing more than 20 fights and other altercations over the past three years, the KHSAA banned handshakes after games and meets in baseball, basketball, football, soccer, softball, volleyball and wrestling. More than a few fights have broken out during the post-game handshake line, so the KHSAA decided to stop the practice all together.

If your youth sports league still allows for post-game handshakes, than please do it and do it with dignity! Shake their hand, look them in the eye and say "good game." Do this for the players, the coach, and maybe even the ref. Losing with dignity means respecting the other team and the effort they have put in, not using the handshake line as a way to get a cheap shot in at your opponent.

4. Know that it's okay to be disappointed.

Again, losing stinks! It is perfectly okay to be disappointed, especially when you feel like you gave it everything you possibly could and the scoreboard didn't reflect that with a win. Your job as a youth athlete is to show up and play your best. There is no shame in losing, nor does losing undermine all the hard work you've done. Sometimes you will come up against a team that is just a little bit better. Or a call in their favor tips the scales just enough to push them ahead. Or they make an astounding play that gives them the win. You can't control those things. All you can control is how hard you play. As Coach Wooden said; "My idea is that you can lose when you outscore somebody in a game, and you can win when you're outscored."