

Playing Favorites

By John Leonard

One day a few years ago, a club board member accused me of "having favorites" on our club team. Several other parent board members nodded their heads in agreement. The implication was that this was a terrible sin. When I was a younger coach, I thought it was terrible also. And he was right. I did have favorites. My favorites were those athletes who most fervently did what I asked of them. Those that did, I gave more attention to. I talked to them more. I spent more time teaching them. I also expected more of them.

The implication that he was making was that my favorites got better than the others because they were my favorites, and that was somehow unfair. He mistook cause for effect.

The fact is, that the athletes who came to me ready to learn, ready to listen, ready to act on what they learned and try it my way, even if it was more challenging, more difficult than they imagined, were ready to get more out of our program. And they were my favorites.

As a coach, I have only one thing to offer to an athlete. That is, my attention. Which means that I attend to their needs. The reward for good behavior should be attention . . . attending to their needs. The consequence of inattention, lack of effort, unwillingness or unready to learn or just plain offensive or disruptive behavior is my inattention to that athlete.

How could it be other than this? If you have three children, and you spend all of your time and energy work working with the one that is badly behaved, what does that tell your other two children? It tells them that to capture your attention, they should behave badly. What we reward, is what we get.

As a coach, I want athletes who are eager to learn eager to experiment to improve, eager to work hard. I want athletes who come to me to help develop their skills both mental and physical, and are willing to accept what I have to offer. Otherwise, why have they come to me. And I am going to reward that athlete with my attention. In so doing, I encourage others to become like the athlete above. If I spent my time with the unwilling, the slothful, the disruptive, I would only be encouraging that behavior.

The link I want to forge is between attention and excellence. Excellence in the sense of achieving all that is possible, and desired. My way of forging that is to provide my attention to those who "attend" to me. This does of course result in increased performance for those that do so. I am a professional coach, and when I pay attention to a person, that person is going to improve. Over time, this makes it appear that my "favorites" are the better swimmers. Not so at all. The better swimmers are those that pay attention, and thus become my favorites.

What Dad didn't realize is that you must have favorites if anyone is to develop in a positive fashion. The coach's job is to reward those who exhibit positive developmental behaviors. Those are my "favorites," and they should be.