

## Have You Taught Your Child to Learn?

by David Benzel, Growing Champions For Life

Mark Twain once said, "A man who does not read a book is no wiser than the man who can't read one." Could it also be said that an athlete who does not listen to a coach has learned as much as the athlete who does not have a coach?

The greatest miscalculation about youth sports today can be found where learning is not the top priority; where competition, winning, and rankings are given more attention than learning. When a calendar-packed game schedule and the scoreboard are the focus of your energy, the tail is wagging the dog. A young athlete needs four to five times as much deliberate practice as he needs competition to truly learn the necessary skills.

Since learning and development is job #1 it's worth asking, "Has your child been taught the necessary mindset to be a true learner during practice?" The answer is not as obvious as it might seem. Many athletes treat practice sessions as a time to "show what I can do" instead of a time to "see what I can learn." The difference is huge.

Learning requires a kind of humility that admits there is much to be learned and "I don't know it all yet." A child has to view herself as a work in progress, and be perfectly fine with being a student-of-the-sport. With this approach a child can view every attempt and every mistake as an opportunity for the body and mind to work together in the mysterious journey called skill development. This requires a no-pressure environment where the rate of learning is acknowledged to be a variable from child to child. "What did your body learn today?" is a more important question than "Did you win today?"

As the parent of an athlete your role is essential for having realistic expectations about the challenges of learning new skills and the time it takes. Comparing your child's rate of learning a particular skill to another child is not only worthless, it's harmful. Children develop at different speeds and at different times. The neurological development is in process all the way to age 13 or 14. The musculature development is in process up until 17 or 18. True skill mastery is not realistic until after all the internal systems are fully developed and yet some parents look at their kids and think, "Why can't you do that perfectly by now? --- you've been playing since you were 4!"

There's nothing as satisfying as learning. The ultimate journey from "I can't yet" to "Now I can" is thrilling. But it comes to those who recognize this as a process of seeking answers, tapping into coaching resources, and a trial and error process on the very edge of one's capabilities. It requires patience and a humble spirit supported by parents who have faith in their athlete's ability to learn. The same faith you had when your children took their first steps....and fell down. You had no doubt about how that challenge would turn out! Have the same faith now.