

Reward Effort Until Effort Is Its Own Reward

By David Jacobson

Among the most important life lessons youth and high school athletes can take from sports is the value of effort. Throughout their lives – in sports, in school, in family and friendship and career – success will require tremendous effort. Eventually your players may come to view effort as its own reward. They may enjoy the sheer exhaustion of sprints or the reassurance that seemingly endless rote repetition of skills has prepared their minds and muscles to perform at gametime.

However, most youth (and adults!) balk at this type of work. Until they learn to experience effort as its own reward, you will need to coax and cajole players into making the necessary commitment during practice. Here are a few approaches:

Introduce Competition

Nothing relieves the mental or physical fatigue of drills and conditioning like a competitive challenge. If players are simply ordered to run sprints, for example, they may just go through the motions. Once players feel there is something at stake, they will expend extra effort. Competition need not pit player against player. For example, if you time sprints, whoever improves the most on their personal best can be the winner. This approach has the added benefit of making conditioning fun, rather than it being seen as punishment.

Targeted Symbolic Rewards.

Establish an award for the player who expends the greatest effort. The award should not have monetary value, nor should it excuse the player from further conditioning or drills. For example, the proverbial “hard hat” or “lunch pail” type of effort might earn the player an actual hard hat or lunch pail as a symbolic trophy at the end of practice.

Keep “Emotional Tanks” Overflowing

Remember, we’re talking here about players enduring drudgery. Getting players to go all out in drills and conditioning calls for even more positive reinforcement than the normally recommended five specific, truthful praises for each piece of constructive criticism.

Even though your players may just be running, they will appreciate hearing, “Wow, look at Bill! He’s picking up the pace today!” Focus on keeping enthusiasm in your voice. If you sound as excited about effort in a sprint as you do about a great shot, your players are more likely to feel that same excitement for the task at hand.





Reward Effort Until Effort Is Its Own Reward, continued

Provide Continual Inspiration.

Players must understand the equation $S=E/T$ (success equals effort over time). Keep them mindful that drills and conditioning are building blocks that yield mostly long-term results.

To keep your players inspired, have a ready supply of examples of hard work paying off. Inspiration may be drawn from pro sports or other high-profile endeavors, but it can be even more effective to discuss a local example or one close in age to your players. That may make your players' long-term goals seem more achievable so that they are sold on the idea that with extra effort, they can succeed, too.

Along the way, emphasize that effort is its own reward. Players may not believe or understand this at first, but when they start to see results from their efforts, they will catch on and improve as athletes and as people.

