

“In Defense of Participation Trophies”

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Let's not blame the trophies.

This is about youth sports -- and specifically the types of trophies that Pittsburgh Steelers linebacker James Harrison denied his children and posted about on Instagram. In his post, Harrison pointed out that "Sometimes your best is not enough, and that should drive you to want to do better." James Harrison's parenting decision is a reflection of the values he wants to teach his children, and I applaud his making a point and defining those goals for his family. However, I prefer to look at these trophies in a different way.

When you're seven or eight years old, you're just beginning to learn about sports – not just how to field a grounder, or shoot a free-throw, but how to sit on the bench while someone else gets a chance. For many kids, it's probable that your “best” isn't going to be good enough. In fact, at those ages, the dynamics associated with being on a team, learning to accept that your teammate made an error, or that you're not cut out to be an athlete may actually be what some kids do best.

My father wasn't in the NFL. I was getting Little League trophies for being part of the team. I wasn't a star, but I knew who the stars were -- we all did. They were the guys who got the MVP (most valuable player) and were named team captain. They were the kids with a drive that I didn't have for sports, who were ultra-competitive, and who cried when our team lost a game. They were often the kids with parents whose own athletic dreams were pushing their children harder, even though, as eight-year-olds, these kids were a long way from the majors.

I wasn't ever going to be one of them.

But I loved getting my year-end trophy. I loved having the coach say a few encouraging words about me at the season ending pizza party. I liked the comraderie – being in a group of kids who had been forged into friendship by our ups and downs on the field. I got a kick out of watching my teammates get “roasted” about events during the past season. The “Banquet” was as fun as the games for me.

I knew my trophy wasn't about my on-field achievements. It simply reminded me that I was on a team with my school pals. It represented my need to be at the game a half hour before game time so that I could warm up. It reminded me that I shouldn't ask the coach when he was going to put me into the game. It also allowed me to remember my one miraculous catch. My trophy was a

souvenir – a physical representation of the experience – just like the medals and t-shirts people get when they participate, but don't win, marathons, 10 or 5Ks, bike rides and many other events.

The first sporting lessons we try to teach our children have to do with sportsmanship.

Idealists used to say “It's not whether you win or lose, it's how you play the game.” I'd like to think that, at ages six through twelve, we're still trying to teach ideals. Our kids will have plenty of time to learn that sometimes cheaters do prosper and that sports can bring out both the best and the worst in people, but at this point in their competitive careers I think our job is to guide, encourage, and reinforce the strengths that they show – even if all they contribute is helping the coach carry the bats to the car.

Ultimately, participation trophies mark the fact that these kids kept a commitment and showed up to the games. That they experienced the wins and losses with everyone else, and contributed, to the best of their abilities, to the outcomes of those contests. Participation trophies are not a gateway drug to entitlement.

I coached Little League. I coached AYSO. My kids had winning and losing records, but all of my clubs were taught what it meant to compete and to be part of a team. If the league didn't provide trophies, I made certificates for my players. I gave a Sportsmanship Award. I gave a Best Attitude certificate, and then a series of funny, personalized "awards" like the "Timex Award" for a player who took a licking and kept on ticking – but everyone got recognized. These awards were given at a group event, with appreciation, understanding and humor.

Not everyone on our team was great, but all of them made some sort of contribution -- even if their contribution was teaching the better players how to be patient with teammates who weren't as skilled as they.

So, let's not blame the trophies – let's focus on encouraging our kids to try new things, and teaching them how to succeed with others while playing on a team.