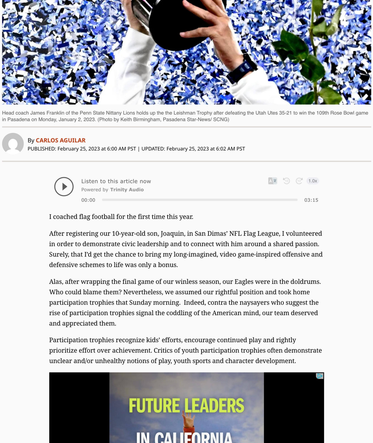


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In defense of participation trophies



Head coach James Franklin of the Penn State Nittany Lions holds up the the Leishman Trophy after defeating the Utah Utes 35-21 to win the 109th Rose Bowl game in Pasadena on Monday, January 2, 2023. (Photo by Keith Birmingham, Pasadena Star-News/ SCNG)

By CARLOS AGUILAR
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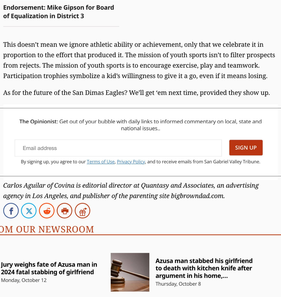
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I coached flag football for the first time this year.

After registering our 10-year-old son, Joaquin, in San Dimas' NFL Flag League, I volunteered in order to demonstrate civic leadership and to connect with him around a shared passion. Surely, that I'd get the chance to bring my long-imagined, video game-inspired offensive and defensive schemes to life was only a bonus.

Alas, after wrapping the final game of our winless season, our Eagles were in the doldrums. Who could blame them? Nevertheless, we assumed our rightful position and took home participation trophies that Sunday morning. Indeed, contra the naysayers who suggest the rise of participation trophies signal the coddling of the American mind, our team deserved and appreciated them.

Participation trophies recognize kids' efforts, encourage continued play and rightly prioritize effort over achievement. Critics of youth participation trophies often demonstrate unclear and/or unhealthy notions of play, youth sports and character development.



To be clear, recognizing participation as a virtue is not new. It was heralded in ancient Greece, extolled during the Renaissance and Enlightenment and is a cornerstone of a shared American culture. Youth sports demand participation and ought to recognize it, too. Our San Dimas Eagles spent from five to seven hours a week preparing, practicing for and playing in games. The kids learned rules, techniques, social skills and made friends. Good things happen when you show up ready to play.

Regrettably, the pandemic exacerbated the downward trend of involvement in youth team sports. The Aspen Institute's State of Play 2022 report shows that only 36.8% of children aged 6-12 play team sports on a regular basis, down from 41% in 2012. The lack of participation is especially pronounced for Black, Hispanic and low-income households and coincides with a growing disinterest in sports along all racial categories. While a trophy won't ensure continued play, an environment that prioritizes a willingness to learn over your ability to read defensive schemes just might. To our detriment, a winner-takes-all approach discourages participation.

Even more, a winner-take-all mentality turns on the faulty premise that youth coaches are objective arbiters of what counts as meritocratic athletic performances. Can you imagine a scenario where some overworked and inexperienced and disorganized dad (or mom) decides which 10-year-old deserves a trophy or not? That's not only cruel, but inane.

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I've yet to see a rubric for what counts as a trophy-worthy effort and performance. Our best school teachers receive years of training in student assessment, while our coaches often wing it ,relying on inherited if not outmoded means of motivation. We now know that when we praise effort versus ability, our kids are more likely to attempt challenging tasks and believe that hard work (and not natural ability) is the path to success.

This doesn't mean we ignore athletic ability or achievement, only that we celebrate it in proportion to the effort that produced it. The mission of youth sports isn't to filter prospects from rejects. The mission of youth sports is to encourage exercise, play and teamwork. Participation trophies symbolize a kid's willingness to give it a go, even if it means losing.

As for the future of the San Dimas Eagles? We'll get 'em next time, provided they show up.

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