

Social Concerns Regarding Participation Trophies

I. Introduction

Pittsburgh Steelers linebacker James Harrison set off a wave of discussion and dispute on Aug. 16, 2015. It wasn't for an unnecessary hit or a perceived concussion for the five-time Pro Bowler; in fact, it had nothing to do with his on-field performance. Instead, the focus was on Harrison's sons, who are eight and six years old.

Harrison took to his Instagram to rant about his sons bringing home participation trophies. "I came home to find out that my boys received two trophies for nothing, participation trophies!" Harrison wrote. "While I am very proud of my boys for everything they do and will encourage them till the day I die, these trophies will be given back until they EARN a real trophy. I'm sorry I'm not sorry for believing that everything in life should be earned."

The statement by the 37-year-old garnered responses from all directions. None may have been so dramatic as that from Jim Vance, a reporter for Washington, D.C.'s NBC4. "It's child abuse to give a kid a trophy that he has not earned," Vance said. "If a parent's responsibility is to teach a kid how to deal with the real world, then that is child abuse. Because that's not the real world" (Bieler, 2015).

While Vance's words were an outlier in the discussion, they represent the strong emotions behind the topic. The two sides of the argument are both strongly opinionated and have a clear division. On one side, there are those like Harrison who feel sports in early childhood are a stepping stone for the remainder of one's life. On the other, are individuals who see sports as merely a game with the trophies being keepsakes from the fun times. Although it is by no means a black and white discussion, there certainly seems to be significant issues stemming from the widely accepted practice of providing participation trophies.

II. Issues with Participation Trophies

One of the major disconnections involving participation trophies is that kids understand their purpose; that is to say, children are aware when they are receiving a trophy just for being there. Hilary Levey, the author of “Trophies, Triumphs and Tears: Children’s Experiences with Competitive Activities,” openly discussed how young competitors easily distinguished between the value of earned trophies and those given for participation.

Levey (2010) explained the use of participation patches in youth soccer by saying, ... these patches often only signal attendance, not a specific placement in an event like the dance ribbons. The soccer kids are aware of this distinction. A female player said: “It’s just like for being there. Like I have the badge from the NCAA tournament where University of Connecticut played, [but] I didn’t play” (p. 325).

Levey explained that the children she interviewed in her study were consciously aware of which trophies were “earned” and which were simply for participation. Her findings certainly dispel the thought that the trophies’ sole purpose is to make the children happy. She makes it clear that children have devalued them.

The existence of participation trophies threatens the power and performance model of sports. The power and performance model is defined as “highly organized and competitive” sports that emphasize six factors, including “exclusive processes through which participants must meet elite performance standards if they wish to be included or continue playing” (Coakley, 2015, p. 64). These standards, according to this idea, are important because it is the main motivating factor for athletes in sports like football. If the drive for being the best and taking home a trophy is removed because it is awarded win or lose, the dynamic is thrown off significantly. Although the power and performance model is more identifiable as athletes reach

high school and progress to the collegiate and professional ranks, its development in childhood sports help make the transition to each new level easier. Removing it can potentially make the progression for would-be star athletes much more difficult.

Another important influence in the realm of participation trophies is the overjustification effect. The over justification effect is a psychological term stating that an external incentive decreases a person's intrinsic motivation to perform a behavior or participate in an activity (Cherry, 2015). To put it simply, the knowledge of a reward causes the actor to care less about the activity they are doing; they are only in it for the reward.

To test this theory, Mark Lepper, David Greene and Richard Nisbett conducted a study known as "the felt-tip marker study". In the study, the trio put nursery school children into three groups and asked them to draw with felt-tipped pens. One group was told about their extrinsic reward before the activity, one group was not told until after the activity and one group was not told nor received an award. Their findings were that the children in the first group played much less with the pens than did the group that was unaware of the awards (Lepper, Greene and Nisbett, 1972, p. 129-137).

The findings of Lepper, Greene and Nisbett reinforce the dangers of participation trophies. Because the children were aware they would be rewarded, they put forth much less effort with the pens. The same could correlate with play in sports, where the abundance of participation trophies could cause players to give lackadaisical efforts. While that is not a huge concern when children are in recreational leagues, a lot of people rely on sports to teach kids the importance of hard work. Harrison's concerns were about the effects it would have on his children later in life, and based on the findings from the felt tip experiment, there was sound reasoning in his words.

The widespread controversy over participation trophies is an interesting conundrum that has developed in American society. While there are a few valid reasons to provide trophies due to participation, the counter-arguments are much stronger and abundant. The main issue with participation trophies is the inherent message that they tend to send to children.

Jean Twenge, a professor at San Diego State University, said it best when she said, “All of the research converges on that the best way to motivate kids is to reward them for good performance and, when they're little, for effort as well. The problem with a participation trophy is it doesn't even reward effort. It rewards showing up, and in some leagues, apparently you don't even need to show up. That's really sending the wrong message,” (Melamed, 2015).

Twenge strikes at the core of the matter. While participation trophies might make some kids feel good in the short term, they ultimately create a very warped value system. Children begin to equate showing up with doing a good job. Unfortunately, this is contradictory to the real world. Simply attending a job does not make a person a valuable member of society. On the contrary, it is productive work that enables a person to be a significant factor in society. And it seems that most Americans have begun to take issue with participation trophies. Approximately 57 percent of Americans believe that these types of trophies should be eliminated (Ekins, 2014). Even though it certainly feels like a trivial matter at times, this controversy should not be taken lightly. If America wants to gain back its global economic advantage, there needs to be a paradigm shift in our values system. Eliminating participation trophies is a big step in this direction.

Another important argument against participation trophies is the huge mental letdown that can occur long-term in kids. Proponents of these trophies argue that they boost the self-

esteem of children and make them feel good about themselves. However, as paradoxical as it seems, these children tend to struggle mightily with their self-esteem once they enter society as adults. They experience serious culture shock and are often unsure of how to deal with the responsibilities. Professor Twenge says that millennials are “anxious and depressed at record levels” (Melamed, 2015).

At the surface, participation trophies seem like a great idea that will make everyone happier, but this is not always the reality. Coaches, leagues, and parents are lying to their kids in the form of these trophies, even if it seems to be a righteous lie. Eventually, every kid reaches the point at which they realize that simply participating in sports was not significant at all. Suddenly, these young adults are forced to deal with serious feelings of disillusionment and inadequacy. Twenge elaborates upon this saying, “Many of them are angry when they get to the real world and find that no one told them it was going to be this difficult,” (Melamed, 2015).

Taking a broader perspective of this argument, it is important to analyze its effects many years down the road. Increases in children’s self-esteem due to participation trophies are not sustained in the later years of their lives. It is crucial that changes do occur to the reward system in American youth sports. Participation trophies seem helpful and tame at first glance, but it seems apparent that its negative effects can be deep and lasting.

III. Problems Caused by Today’s Competitive Nature

Research conducted over the last 50 years concluded that it is nearly impossible to attribute sports with the development of good character in the athletes that play them. Coakley (2015) explained “The Great Sports Myth” as the belief that “sport is essentially pure and good, and its purity and goodness are transferred to anyone who play, consumes or sponsors sports” (p. 11). This myth relies on two major assumptions: that all athletes have the same experiences

playing the same sports and that organized sports provides a unique experience that cannot be gained through any other activity (Coakley, 2015, p. 62).

Sport sociologists work to overcome “The Great Sports Myth” through research in order to ease the burden of decision-making for parents and coaches. One purpose of the study of sports in society is to determine the conditions where sports are most likely to produce positive effects (Coakley, 2015, p. 12). In his New York Times article published on Jan. 16, 2015, Paul Sullivan interviewed three former collegiate and professional athletes now in their 30’s and 40’s on the topic of the rising cost of youth sports. In his article, all three men agreed that youth sports today bear little resemblance to their experiences.

One of the former athletes, John Amaechi, agreed that sports can be used to teach life lessons, but believes parents are misguided in thinking they need to spend so much time and money to achieve that. Amaechi said, “Sport teaches what we want it to teach. If you want it to teach about teamwork you can teach that through sports. If you want it to teach about social justice it can. It just takes an awful lot of effort” (Sullivan, 2015).

Similar verdicts were found in a 2008 study conducted by J. Griffin. This study focused on myths surrounding sport education and physical education in today’s youth. One of the myths explored in the study was that “fun is not important in the business of elite sports” (Griffin, 2008, p.12). J. Griffin found results indicating, “that fun must extend from the beginning through the elite stages of athletic-talent development” (Gould & Carson, 2004).

Well-known professional athletes, such as soccer player Lionel Messi, speak out against the over-competitiveness presented in today’s youth sports by speaking of their own love of the game. Messi says “I have fun like a child in the street. When the day comes when I’m not enjoying it, I will leave football [soccer]” (Coakley, 2015, p. 99). With so much negative

attention placed around youth sports, messages like these are vital to current and future participants in youth sports.

In 2011, a study was conducted by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) in the United Kingdom to evaluate how positively or negatively children perceived participation in youth sports. The study conducted an online survey and collected responses from 4,000 children participating in organized sport in the U.K. The study found that 75 percent of respondents reported emotional harm, followed by 29 percent experiencing sexual harassment, and 24 percent experiencing physical harm.

The study found that most young people considered this negative culture to be normal, and 'just what happens in sport'. This illustrates a sporting culture which accepts and condones disrespectful and negative behaviors. The report recommends that sport focus on creating a culture that builds on what children and young people value about sport participation (such as making friends and being part of a team), and ensuring they are respected and listened to. Coaches should be supported to enable them to work with children and young people and ensure sport is a positive experience. (Alexander, Stafford, & Lewis, 2011).

As seen in the results of this study, youth sport participants continue to experience positive benefits despite negative aspects of sports participation.

IV. Defending Participation Trophies

Participation trophies still manage to provide some positive attention from many who receive them and those who support them. It is important that young children get recognition for working hard early on in their sporting careers. It could just be an activity they are casually participating in, or a competitive sport they have decided to challenge themselves with, but a

trophy can help motivate their continuation. We all seek rewards in life, no matter the age, in order to ensure what we are doing is worthwhile.

Hilary Levey Friedman, a sociologist who has studied this issue, found that a child's first trophy really does mean something to them (Zadrozny, 2014). Eventually a child will grow old enough to understand the activities at which they excel and what they probably can afford to discontinue. It is all right if one day people mature and do not appreciate these pieces of plastic; however, most can recall a fond celebration of receiving them. Brandy Zadrozny, a soccer mom commented, "Sending my son home empty-handed at the end of a hard-fought season won't help him learn the lesson of losing, it will teach him early that there's no value in the attempt," (Zadrozny, 2014).

It is important that children develop these skills when they are young. Determination, perseverance, sportsmanship, and even how to lose with grace are some valuable takeaways that children may look past if they are not enticed with reward. At this age, winning is not everything, and their performance will not suffer due to lack of praise toward the champion. These kids did earn their trophies. They encourage their effort and attendance, and at the age of six or eight years old there is not much else we can ask of them (Berish, 2015).

Although the American public as a whole may not agree that participation trophies are beneficial to youth, the majority of young adults do. People between ages 18-24 voted 51 percent in favor of kids receiving participation trophies in the previously mentioned poll. A lot of opinions have to do with household yearly income.

The poll also found that the more adults win at life, the more likely they are to want to keep the spoils of victory out of the hands of losers. The desire to withhold participation trophies increased with income, age, and education. While 55 percent of those making

less than \$30,000 a year came out in favor of participation trophies, only 23 percent of those at the top of the income food chain at \$110,000 wanted trophies for all” (Ekins, 2014).

Obviously, these opinions may differ depending on the location and level of each league, but it seems that the younger adults truly value them as a positive part of their recreational experience.

In the real world, it is interesting to note that a large majority of success is achieved merely by showing up. People who give up easily tend to not do very well, no matter what challenge is in front of them (Zadrozny, 2014). Even some activities for other adults give out rewards to everyone who completes a task. Runners who partake in events ranging from a 5 kilometer to a marathon get surprisingly excited about the hardware thrust upon them after they cross the finish line (Melamed, 2015). These medals are passed out to every participant, not solely the winner.

A significant portion of each child’s growth relies heavily on his or her parent or guardian. There is no right or wrong way to parent, and they have every right to take a trophy away from their child. However, they chose to enter this league knowing this was the prize at the end of competition.

John Smoltz, a former Major League Baseball pitcher, has discussed the importance of parents easing up on their children and allowing them to play just for the fun of it again.

“Know that your children's passion and desire to play baseball is something they can do without a competitive pitch. Every throw a kid makes today is a competitive pitch. They don't go outside. They don't have fun. They don't throw enough but they are competing

and maxing out too hard, too early and that's why we are having these problems. So please, take care of those great future arms," (Smoltz, 2015).

Overworking children when they are young can lead to severe injury in the future that can affect not only their career in sports but also their everyday lives. It is important to avoid burnout and allow each child to find whatever activity makes them happy, instead of being forced into one. This concept may be a little more difficult for someone like James Harrison to understand, as he has reached the highest level of sport in his craft. His expectations could be greater for his children and his opinions may be strong, but his experiences are narrow and specific which may not apply to every activity in which his children participate.

There are many children who have benefitted from these recognitions, but are there really examples of people whose lives have been ruined because of a premature trophy (Collins, 2015)? The ability for growth is far more likely than the ability to struggle because of it. Sports columnist Joe Medley writes, "Those raging against participation trophies place far more value on them than do participants" (Medley, 2015). The success stories seem to outweigh any negative perspective. A father to two boys, Donnie Collins, brings up a great point: "Since when is being successful better than being happy and learning something new?" (Collins, 2015).

Society continues to change and hopefully parents can continue to give their children credit when credit is due. You do not see many children parading around to all their friends showing off their participation trophy. Meanwhile, there were smiles created and memories made, leaving children with a souvenir to commemorate their experience.

V. Conclusion

While the issue of participation trophies may seem trivial to those removed from youth sport, the implications of this discussion are significant. As youth sport becomes more

competitive and children become highly-specialized athletes at an early age, the tradition of participation trophies seems likely to disappear. However, eliminating these rewards may serve to reinforce the elitist and competitive culture developing in youth sport. Without any recognition for effort and hard work, children may become entrenched in the win-at-all-costs mentality and lose sight of the fun of the game.

This is part of a larger trend towards the disappearance of recreational sport for children that coincides with the emergence of childhood specialization in one sport. Many critics caution that these trends are leading to the increase in injury and burnout among developing athletes. This is not to say eliminating participation trophies causes negative effects or leads to dangerous consequences as athletes get older, but it does fall in line with the growing competitive culture in all levels of sport and could have a lasting impact on the future of youth sports.

On the other hand, continuing to hand out participation trophies will likely have adverse effects on participants as well. Studies have shown the concern that a guaranteed reward may lessen the incentive to work hard is well-founded. Additionally, all children receiving the same trophy, regardless of level of effort or performance, undermines the work of those children who put forth the most work and played the best. This may teach them that it is not necessary to try their hardest because their effort will not be recognized beyond the effort of those who simply showed up. A social world in which every child is treated the same may destroy the competitive spirit of the game and hinder an athlete's future potential.

After analyzing both sides of this argument, there is no simple answer about the role of participation trophies in youth sport. Perhaps, the best solution lies somewhere in the middle, at an imperfect compromise. By implementing age restrictions on participation trophies, youth

sports leagues and organizations can minimize the negative effects of both keeping and eliminating these rewards.

Research has shown incentives are important for young children and are a source of pride and positive association with sport and teamwork. Studies have also shown that children are able to distinguish rewards based on effort from those based on performance. For these reasons, it is important to continue the tradition of participation trophies for young children.

There is no magic age at which participation trophies should be eliminated, which makes this compromise an imperfect one. However, a general rule should focus on the skill and level of competition in the sport. Four-year-olds playing soccer, with no concept of the rules and little variation in skill sets, should receive trophies and recognition for their participation and teamwork. This socialization and team atmosphere, regardless of athletic skill and wins, are important for young children and should be commemorated.

Conversely, 12-year-olds playing in a baseball league should not get these rewards, because they understand the importance of competition and individual talents have emerged within the team. These children have learned the importance of working hard and improving in their sport, and should only receive trophies for stellar performances and victories because that is the culture of higher-level athletics. At the end of the season, these athletes may receive framed team photos or other keepsakes. These serve to commemorate time and effort with the team, but do not represent awards without reason.

There is a considerable gray area regarding participation trophies and whether they should be eliminated, but incorporating both sides of this issue will hopefully produce the most positive effects for children and have a beneficial impact on the future of youth sport.

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