

# Utah Area Sports

## Sports News—April 2010

### A tribute to Elder Marvin J. Ashton of the Quorum of the Twelve from 1971 to 1994

“Sports were important in his life because of their value in terms of personal enjoyment, their value in maintaining personal fitness, and their value in reaching and molding young people. During his years of directing Young Men’s athletics, activities were expanded to offer many opportunities in which young people could participate. Elder Ashton was known for saying that everyone should keep fit, and he practiced what he preached. A standout in Church basketball as a youth, he was captain of a Latter-day Saint missionary team that won the British national title while he was serving as a full-time missionary in the British Isles. In tennis, the brotherly rivalry that began when he and his brother Wendell both were children endured for seventy years. He lovingly said that one of the reasons he first dated Norma Bernston, whom he married in the Salt Lake Temple in 1940, was her parents’ tennis court. In 1951, he was a member of the winning team in the all-Church tennis doubles championship; in 1954, he and his wife won the mixed doubles championship; and in 1969 they made it to the finals in all-Church competition. He consistently maintained his own personal fitness regimen of tennis and jogging.” *Written in celebration of his life in the April, 1994 Ensign*

### Winning and Losing

An editorial by Jerry Borrowman, Area Communications Director

In addition to my calling in Area Sports I serve as an instructor in our ward priest quorum. Two weeks ago, while assembling in the bishop’s office, the young men were discussing the fact that they’d failed to qualify for the regional basketball tournament. I was surprised to find that there was no rancor nor bitterness, or even excuses. When I asked them who had won, they sighed and talked about a neighboring ward that has a highly skilled player who is likely to get a college basketball scholarship. But even as they reported this, they spoke with admiration, not envy. I was impressed and proud of our young men for being good losers.

Winning and losing—nearly everyone agrees that winning is better. But since every competitive season is going to end up with an equal number of wins and losses, somebody has to lose a lot of games. Perhaps it’s worth exploring what value can be gained even when a game is lost. Virtually everyone will have failures as well as successes in their lives and I believe that learning how to cope with and learn from our losses makes for a happier life.

A note of caution—losing has both positive and negative elements, and to ignore those consequences is a mistake. Here are some of the positive aspects of losing:

- **Losing provides feedback that can help us improve.** As long as a group or individual is winning, it has very little incentive to change, to innovate, or to improve. In sports a wise coach watches what goes wrong, and then adapts the team’s play in future games to compensate for the mistakes. A post-game review in which the players identify their own errors is one of the best ways to do better in the next game. After inheriting a dispirited football team with a string of losing seasons, LaVell Edwards revolutionized the game of football as he adopted a passing oriented offense to overcome the strength of BYU’s traditional rivals, who excelled at running attacks. In responding to BYU’s losses, he made the game a lot more exciting to watch and to play.
  - In the business world a lost sale can be a source of competitive feedback to build a better product, improve distribution, or enhance customer service. Companies that are complacent, seldom innovate. Analyzed thoughtfully, losing can become the source of future success.
  - I’m a professional author, with 9 books in print. But I never would have made it without some painful feedback after being rejected 22 times on my first book; *Three Against Hitler*. That was a lot of losing, and for more than a year I gave up trying. Then my co-author Rudi Wobbe, the hero of the story, urged me to try again. Rather than simply submit the same manuscript, I sought the advice of my wife Marcella and Derin Rodriguez, a professional writer. They were able to point out flaws in the book that had caused its rejection. Rewriting the story, it was accepted by the next publisher and went on to inspire literally hundreds of thousands of readers through Rudi and Helmuth Huebener’s remarkable story. The rejections prompted the the feedback I needed to ultimately succeed.
- **Winning and losing gives a sense of scale.** The first time our young son lost at the game of Scrabble he became so angry that he threw the board on the floor in a fit of pique when told he had to clean up the game. Children have no sense of scale, attributing the same emotional energy to matters of little consequence as to those of great importance. We solved the board game problem by declaring that the winner had to clean-up, thus taking some of the sting out of losing. Thousands of games later, Scrabble is still a weekly event in which we play our son and his wife by computer, since they live in Oakland, California. Between the four of us we’ve lost hundreds of games since then with no thrown computers or keyboards. That’s one of the advantages of competitive sports—in the inevitable course of winning and losing a person gains a better understanding of what matters and what doesn’t. For example, losing a quick game of 3-on-3 basketball does not carry the same impact as losing an Olympic Gold Medal event. And, even as important and heartbreaking as losing in the Olympics is to the athlete who has spent thousands of hours practicing to qualify for that premier competition, losing an Olympic match isn’t as important as the loss of the life of one of our servicemen in Iraq or Afghanistan. The fact is that some things matter more than others, and the way to figure that

out is to compete in events where the consequences aren't that serious. *Church Sports creates opportunities to win and lose in a positive and supportive environment.*

Stated another way, Church Sports can be a great way to practice for life. The young boy who couldn't stand to lose at Scrabble is now a 33 year-old attorney who lives in a world of wins, losses, and compromises. His ability to succeed in his career was aided, in part, by the competitions he learned to deal with as a child. By learning that you don't have to win every game to have a winning season, sports teaches scale. Even more important, it teaches that striving, improving and having fun can be its own reward, regardless of the numbers on the board.

- **Losing can lead to emotional resiliency.** The young men in our priest quorum displayed emotional resiliency because they have learned to set aside their disappointment while cheering the accomplishments of another person. That's a very mature attitude and one that allows them to accept a loss with grace. It's natural to be angry when our goals are frustrated, but learning to lose gracefully tempers our anger until we gain emotional control. Emotional control is clearly an essential element of spiritual success. The young man who struggles against temptation, sometimes failing, but courageous enough to always try again, ultimately wins the battle of self-mastery and thus gains the confidence to go forward boldly in the service of the Lord.
- **Losing can point us in another direction.** The impact of a win or loss isn't as high in Church Sports as in other endeavors in life, but sports often provides a great metaphor for how to lead a better life. One of the most important lessons of mortal life is to find the unique talents with which we are blessed and to then magnify those talents. Losing is a way of finding out which talents we don't have. Consider how many athletes pursue one sport, only to find that they can't rise to the level of competition they desire. Disappointed and frustrated, they try their hand at a different sport and are amazed at how quickly they succeed.
  - It's like that in many of our endeavors. I empathize with Joseph Smith, who had some spectacular failures in his life: losing the pages of the translation of the Book of Mormon; the Kirtland Banking Society; the friendship of some of his most trusted friends; and even the apparent failure of Zion's Camp. But Joseph Smith adapted to these adversities and learned from them in a way that allowed him to move the Church both physically and spiritually until it gained the strength to hold its own against the forces that opposed it.
  - *Sometimes the best course is to change course.*
- **Losing can motivate us to try harder.** It was Thomas Edison who said that genius is 1% inspiration, 99% perspiration. He also is quoted as saying, "Many of life's failures are people who did not realize how close they were to success when they gave up." To the degree that losing causes us to try harder it improves our lives.

**What about the pitfalls of losing?** One of the most important pitfalls is to pretend that losing doesn't matter. It does matter,

because it means that we had a hope and an ambition that was not realized. If we use that defeat to reevaluate the goal or to positively restructure the way we pursue the goal, then losing was valuable.

But if we allow losing to defeat us to the point that we simply give up, then mediocrity sets in. It's fine to celebrate participation, but most people know instinctively that the whole purpose of an activity is to try to win. To say that winning (and therefore losing) doesn't matter is to diminish the success of those who win—it cheapens their accomplishment and reduces their motivation to continue striving towards perfection. The scriptural injunction is to "Be ye therefore perfect, even as I, or your father who is in heaven is perfect." (3 Nephi 12: 48) That's a demand for *success*, not failure. That God understands that we will have many setbacks along the journey is evident in the atonement. But that doesn't excuse us from trying. *Losing becomes failure only when we give up.*

**What does this mean to Church Sports?** A couple of thoughts. First, success can be defined in many ways. For example, a program is successful that:

- Fellowships a less active member regardless of the number of games won or lost.
  - Emphasizes good sportsmanship equally with winning.
  - Celebrates victory, without demeaning those who lose.
  - Tracks individual progress and celebrates personal growth.
- Second, the handshakes at the end of the game are, in my opinion, eternally important.
- Even with all the rejections I've received on my books, I was still encouraged to keep trying. When the victors treat the vanquished with respect and the losing team sincerely congratulates the winners, then both teams are elevated and both teams win.
  - It bears repeating: losing is not the same as failing—only giving up is failing.

**"There must needs be opposition in all things."** (2 Nephi 2: 11). That's not an observation, it's a spiritual imperative. Muscles grow when exercised. Knowledge increases with study. Everything good in life comes from struggle. Once again, Church Sports is an example for how to live our lives in that it allows participants the chance to struggle physically, emotionally, and, sometimes spiritually (when sportsmanship is an issue). But that is why we are here—to struggle and to grow. Church Sports creates so many opportunities for members to gain the joy that comes from positive associations and the emotional intensity that comes from competition. The exhilaration of winning a hard fought game, and the disappointment of losing the game, both tell us that we are alive. The lessons learned in sports carry over to so many other areas of our lives that it's well worth the investment of time and effort on the part of those who organize and manage the program. Channeled correctly, Church Sports leads to the type of camaraderie and fellowship that bind us together as one. *Our service in Church Sports really does matter.*

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