

## **Success in Athletics – What Does it Mean?**

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I hope you have taken time to read Steve Heldebrand's summary of our recent winter athletic trip to Houston. If you did, you know that the trip was a mixture of great wins and heart-breaking losses. Now that the seasons are completed for our soccer and basketball teams, it is only natural to look back and try to determine whether or not our teams were successful.

Success in the world of team sports can be defined in any number of ways. The most obvious, of course, is the number of wins and losses. A second measure might be whether championships are won or lost. A third could be to ask whether or not team goals (whatever they might have been) were reached. If any one of these definitions were used as a measure of success by our winter teams, we would have to conclude that we finished the season with a mixture of successes and failures.

The above definitions, in my opinion, are overused, too simplistic and filled with pitfalls. Should every win be deemed a success and every loss a failure? If team goals are set too low and those goals are met, should we call ourselves successful? If our only goal is to win championships, have we failed if the championship eludes us?

I would like to suggest two other measures of success in athletics. The first of these is defined by the answer to a simple question: "Did I work hard in practice?" Or, stated another way, "Did I give my team the best chance to win by trying my best to do everything my coach asked me to do on a daily basis?" Every good coach I have ever known has told me that most games are won, not on the field or court, but in practice every day. Since all athletes spend the highest percentage of their time not in competition, but in practice, it make sense that success be judged, in part, by what happens in practice. If an athlete can answer yes to the first question, then the first step to success has been achieved.

Second in my definition of success in athletics is the answer to another simple question: "When the time comes to compete, did I compete?" I choose to draw the distinction here between competing and simply playing the game. For me, playing at a game or activity evokes images of fun, relaxation, recreation and diversion. We all hope these words apply to healthy participation on an athletic team, but they must to take a second seat to what an athletic team is expected to do – to compete – to understand the importance of winning and the rewards of working toward the goal of achieving victory.

One of the major reasons we ask our students to be involved in athletics at Holland Hall is to learn the importance of competition and where it belongs. Too often, we talk of

competing for grades, competing for friends, competing for attention, competing in life – implying that in the areas of grades, friends, attention, and life in general, there must be winners and losers. In my view, we do a disservice to our students when we allow the idea of competition to pervade so many other areas of their lives. The importance of competition is best understood within a healthy athletic program – the idea that in this area of our lives, competing with the goal of winning is a worthwhile endeavor and the primary reason we are here.

Let us now return to the question of success during the recently completed winter athletic season. Did our basketball and soccer teams have successful seasons? If my definitions are used, we need not ask how many wins our teams achieved or how many trophies they brought home, but whether or not our athletes practiced to win every day and competed to win in every contest. Given what I know about the quality of our coaches and athletes in the Upper School, I feel confident in saying that our winter season was a great success.