

PSYCHOLOGY

DO YOU WANT TO WIN *or* HAVE A WINNING TEAM?

by kamiludeen shonowo

Soccer, like any team sport, is involved in winning and losing: on any one day, at a particular soccer game, one team will win and one will lose - except, of course, in the case of that grievously irritating in-between limbo, the tie.

Few people relish a tie, but even fewer savour a loss. A pretty safe bet is that every athlete wants to win; else, why compete? Why go through the conditioning, sacrifice, practice, exertion, and drills if not to excel? Why put your body, mind, and spirit through rigorous training and extensive exertion if not to come out on top? Many coaches talk about a winning attitude.

But what is a win? What is a winner? And does a coach want to win or to have a winning team? There is a difference. The word "win" comes from Old English: to work, labour, strive, contend or fight. In that sense, "win" was first used in the great battle epic Beowulf, an appropriate beginning for a word about competitive matches. So to win signifies success, but by implication, that achievement means the ruin of the other team. And if to win, win, win is the primary focus of the coach, then that loss, loss, loss - when it comes - is devastating.

On the other hand, a winner is one who gains something, especially by effort or merit. A winning team is one which achieves a victory because of its cooperative energy and intrinsic value. So what does this word history game mean for soccer coaches in Alabama today? You cannot succeed unless you are willing to fail; so, every time you go out on a field, you have a 50-50 chance of failing. Being physically trained and technically prepared are of vital importance to mold a winning team. But possibly of more consequence is the mental game. Winning is not defeating everyone else and if that is your definition of success, you will forever fail. There are always other teams better, more skilled than you and other teams less competent, less skilled than you. A win simply shows how you stacked up against the opponent on that very day at that time - not the value or worth of your team or its individual players.

The year Babe Ruth hit his record-breaking 60 home runs in 1927, he also struck out more times than anyone else - ever - in the history of baseball. Think about it: he had to fail miserably to win big. When Alabama's football team, coached by Paul Bryant, would find themselves down 28 to 12 to arch rivals at the end of the second quarter, the Bear would say in the locker room at half time, "Okay, boys, we have them where we want them." Have they where we want them? Down 16 points and half the game gone? Bear Bryant knew the simple concept that it is easier to rise to an occasion and prove what your team is made of than to maintain a lead, especially with a cocky attitude. When you are ahead, on top, the champs, the only way to go is down.

Failing is an opportunity to see who and where you are and if you can take a first half loss and turn it around by adjusting, energizing, and persevering - rather than looking over your shoulder and trying to compare your guys to the other team - then, you are starting to have a band of winning players.

When all you want is the win, you worry about someone else's performance or the other team's accomplishments. You have a narrow focus and may even berate and demoralize your own players in an all-consuming desire to be on top. By that action, you weaken your team and allow them to fail before they even step back out onto the field.

Success is an inner concept, a part of the mental development of each player, and of the team as a whole. When you carry victory inside you, you accomplish much more than if you struggle to simply win each game against each opponent each day they come upon you. If you concentrate, with tunnel vision, solely on a win, you emphasize outcome over process, ego over human development. On the other hand, if you centre on creating a winning team, then those players win instinctive, spontaneously.

How can you achieve an attitude which constitutes a winning team? Help every player on the team reach his or her potential. What are their weaknesses? Gently correct them. What are their strong points? Vigorously encourage them. Once each player is confident in his or her own skills, inspire that player to be dependent upon all the other team-mates. Instil trust and camaraderie. Individual cells in the body work because of cooperation and harmony. What is cancer but some of these cells getting out of accord? What is a losing team but some of the players feeling unincorporated, under-utilized, out of sync - and thus desiring to prove themselves by hogging the ball rather than passing, longing to shoot the goal rather than assisting it, and thus making mistakes instead of executing moves?

A winning team loves to win a game, but is not dependent upon each win to prove its worth. A winning team knows that each member is important and that as a whole, they can rarely be beat. When they do lose, they simply learn from the mistakes and forge on, positively looking forward to the next contest.

A loss to a winning team simply shows that every obstacle has a hidden opportunity for instruction. A winning team triumphs naturally because each player is a winner and because, as a whole, they carry the team's success in their collective heart, mind, and spirit.