

# Learning from the best

Olympic champion Michael Phelps found success in London by relaxing and having fun. Here's how you can help your young athletes do the same in their sports, too.

**The Olympics may be behind us, but there is a lot that we can learn from the world's greatest athletes when they perform on the world's largest stage.**

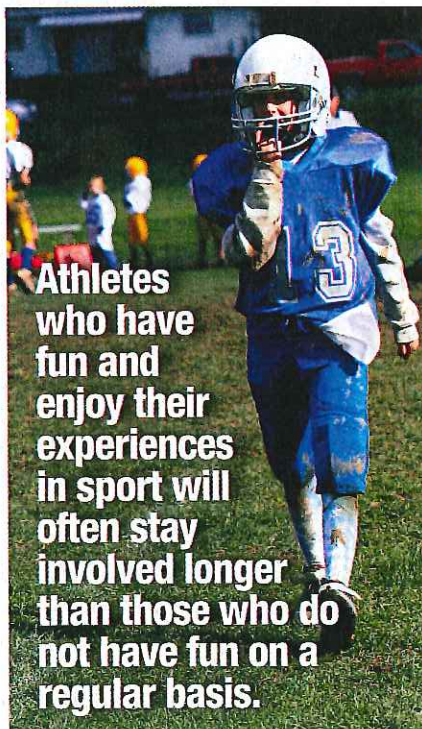
If you watched the Games this summer, you saw wins and losses, happiness and heartache, athletes exceeding expectations and competitors who fell short of what they hoped to do. Though these are the greatest athletes in the world, a lot of what they experience may be similar to what youth athletes experience. And because of this, we can learn from the people that your athletes may aspire to be.

Perhaps you have someone who wants to be the next Hope Solo or McKayla Maroney. Maybe you are coaching someone who you think could be the next LeBron James. With athletic potential can also come pressure, and it becomes very important to teach athletes not only the physical skills they need to take on challenges, but also the mental skills to handle pressure.

A highlight for many spectators of the Summer Games was watching Michael Phelps, arguably one of the world's all-time greats in any sport, continue to break records and bring home medals. Phelps is impressive not only because of his accomplishments, but also because of the mental skill and stamina he brings to his training and performances. Phelps has shown the ability to succeed time and time again but at the start of his swims in the Olympics this summer, his performances were not as strong as he had hoped.

Halfway through his swims, however, something changed. In an interview after all of his swims were behind him, he said: *I couldn't ask to finish any better. You know obviously it was a slow start to the beginning of the week. You know for me, I'm here, I enjoyed this Olympics probably more than anything you know just being able to lay back and just have fun. You know that's really what this is all about...*

Then, when asked if something kicked in in the middle he replied: *I think a couple days into it I realized the first day that I was super tight, I was trying to be intense, and I guess after that I just started relaxing more. I started smiling more. And everything started falling into place. I didn't feel that great in the water but I just went out and raced as hard as I could and started smiling and started enjoying it.*



**Athletes who have fun and enjoy their experiences in sport will often stay involved longer than those who do not have fun on a regular basis.**

## FUN FACTOR

Having fun – it seems so simple, and it may be surprising to hear that fun is what made the difference for Michael Phelps in his final Olympic Games. Fun is the reason many of our youth athletes begin playing sports, and sadly, lack of fun is one of the most often reported reasons why athletes leave sports. Many athletes end up quitting their sport at the onset of adolescence when other areas of life take on more importance, and if sports are no longer fun, they likely won't want to stay.

Coaches have the ability to help sports remain fun, even when the level of competition becomes more serious and gets tougher. Here are a few ideas to help your athletes continue to have fun:

- ▶ Encourage athletes to set their own goals. Motivation is higher when athletes have a sense of control over what they are working on.
- ▶ Allow athletes to have some say in how practices are run. You are the coach, and you can remain in control, but perhaps an athlete chooses one drill at the end of practice, or give them two choices and they can vote on which one they prefer. Similar to setting goals, athletes will be more motivated and have more fun when they have a say in what goes on.



► Praise effort and improvement, and spread positive reinforcement equally amongst your athletes. When athletes see that they are making progress, they are likely to be more inclined to continue to work harder and want to see more improvement; if they are mostly told what they're doing wrong, this can take away the fun.

► Notice if your athletes smile and laugh, or if they regularly look less than happy. You can have athletes who not only take training seriously, but do so in an environment with laughter and fun. Maybe you plan team outings or team dinners, or celebrate birthdays on the field after practice. Find ways to help your team enjoy spending time together.

► Ask yourself: Am I having fun? If you aren't, chances are this will affect how you are coaching your team. Find

ways to have fun when you coach; talk with your assistant coaches or fellow coaches and think about how you and your athletes can have fun on the field. Michael Phelps' coach works hard but you can tell by watching him that he enjoys what he does.

Athletes who have fun and enjoy their experiences in sport will often stay involved longer than those who do not have fun on a regular basis. Getting to the Olympics, or high levels of sport performance, certainly requires more than just having fun, but chances are if the fun is lost then the athlete may not stay involved long enough to find out just how far he or she can go. Michael Phelps knows how important it is to "just have fun" and coaches are a great resource for helping athletes find and maintain fun as they train, prepare and compete. **sk**



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# Winning with Class

By Bill Macbeth

Youth sports coaches have special opportunities to build the "attitude foundations" of their young athletes. Are you up to the challenge?

**The "complete player." It's what all coaches are after. We all know him or her – that player who has all the skills. He or she can play offense, defense, and is willing to do anything for the coach. They're simply a coach's dream.**

New University of Richmond football coach Danny Rocco no doubt feels the same way about such players. However, once they are in his program, he takes it a little further. It is known within his program as "Whole Person Development."

This is exactly how we need to think as coaches and administrators when we are working with our young players. Making players into those who "can play on both sides of the ball" is simply not enough. Will we have the time, the resources, or the overall access to the players that Coach Rocco will this year? Probably not.



However, the advantage that we do have is that we get a chance to make an impression on these young players at the *beginning* of their sports journeys. While Coach Rocco is preparing men to go out and face the world, we will be able to have some part in

**Always be willing to be flexible when a player has to miss a game or practice because of school-related functions, or homework – FIRST school, THEN sports.**

molding young people at the time in their lives when they are most impressionable – the perfect time to help them build their "attitude foundations."

Winning and Class need to be a package deal in terms of what our young players should receive from