

Beyond the Score: The Impact of Blowouts on Youth Athletes

An article by Dr Chris Stankovich

Do you enjoy a lopsided victory in sports, otherwise known as a “blowout?” For many fans the answer is “no,” with their preference being an exciting, competitive game instead. What about athletes, do they enjoy mismatched games where one team has barely a chance at keeping the game close, much less winning the game? Similar to fans, most athletes I talk to (and work with) also reveal that they prefer competitive games over blowouts. It is from the athlete standpoint that I would like to further explore, particularly as it relates to potential athletic growth (or lack thereof) athletes experience when competing against teams where either they are heavily favored, or the opponent is heavily favored. Are these healthy, growth-potential experiences, or do lopsided games actually hinder athletic growth?

Examining the impact of competition

When thinking about the most optimal facets relating to sport competition, *contests in which competitors have a roughly similar chance of winning almost always produces the best experience and results.* In fact, when studying [Flow](#) (known as “the zone” to athletes) there is ample evidence that in events where individuals are challenged and believe they have a chance to win many great things happen, including greater motivation, sharper focus, and more galvanized resiliency, to name a few. Athletes who feel as though they *can* win if they bring their best game are more likely to play harder, encourage teammates to play together, and play until the final whistle. In fact, one of the core components of being in Flow is that you are challenged by the task at-hand (meaning it is tough to get in the zone if you feel you have little, if any, chance for success).

If we have support for the importance of healthy competition, what do we know about games where one team is so much worse than the competition that there is little chance for success? Actually, we know a lot about these situations, and the findings are anything but optimal. Below are three predictable observations that commonly happen in blowout games:

- Interest and motivation wanes for both the favorite and the underdog, especially when it becomes clear the underdog has little chance for success.
- Focus becomes divided and distracted as the favorites feel they *barely have to try*, while the underdogs think *why even try?*
- Risk of injury increases as focus decreases since both teams lose focus and concentration.
- Learning opportunities (i.e. skill acquisition) become even more challenge for coaches trying to help kids. Kids on the winning team do not generally take the instruction with the best focus, and

kids on the losing team often “clock out” rather than listen closely to coaching prompts. Neither of these scenarios are optimal.

This consistent finding is important, especially for coaches struggling to fill out a season schedule and considering adding a very mismatched game, non-competitive game. While adding a few cupcakes might be easy wins on the schedule, it is important to weigh those likely results against the risks kids may experience while playing against a team that doesn’t present a challenge.

Final thoughts

Lopsided sport contests do not seem to serve anyone well, and may, in fact, set athletes back. For kids on the winning side of a blowout it is easy to lose motivation and focus, leaving them susceptible to injury. And for kids on the team playing against competition way over their head, the experience can leave them anxious, lacking confidence, and possibly even push some kids into an early sport retirement if sports are no longer fun. Ideally, kids lock in and get into the zone by playing against roughly similar competition, as these kinds of match-ups bring out the best in terms of motivation, focus, and resiliency.

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