

The Value of Playing Team Sports: Lifelong Skills for the Real World and Workplace

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consulting adviceDavid NguyenLifelong SkillsSchool AthleticsTeam SportTeamwork



How does playing on a sports team translate to success in life?

Knowing how to play well with coworkers is very similar to knowing how to play well on a sports team. There is a joke that goes, “We never really leave high school.”

Being part of a workgroup at work is very similar to being part of a sports team. Learning about improving yourself as a teammate makes you more prepared to improve yourself as a member of a company or social group.

What can be learned from playing team sports?

There are at least 7 lessons that can be learned from playing team sports:

1. Learning how to perform under pressure.
2. Learning when to lead and when to follow.
3. Learning how to lose well.
4. Learning non-verbal communication, also known as emotional intelligence.
5. Learning how to make personal sacrifices for good of the team.
6. Learning how to be reliable.
7. Learning how to encourage people.

Does everyone automatically learn valuable life skills from playing on a team?

As the saying goes, “Those who have wise ears will hear.” As with everything else in life, not everyone picks up on important lessons that may come from mundane activities. Most people intuitively learn these lessons, though they may not recognize this process of learning as a formal type of training. A person must intentionally look for the chance to learn these lessons, or practice recognizing when the chances arise. Some of these lessons are

harder to learn than others, because they require us to face the reality of where our character is and where it, perhaps, should be – **which often isn't fun.**

1. What does it mean to learn how to perform under pressure?

Sometimes, winning or losing comes down to one last play by one person, or that your team has to adjust to a new game plan half-way through a game. At other times, you know beforehand that your opponents are better than you, so there is a lot of mental preparation to play well and to not be intimidated. These moments create a lot of pressure for players, which make them used to performing well under pressure. The discipline of facing intimidation and still performing well translates over to many things in life, such as studying and taking tests.

2. What does it mean to know when to lead and when to follow?

When playing a team sport, such as basketball, not everyone performs their 100% best at every game. Everyone has bad days or “off days” on which they just can't seem to play as their usual self. Teammates practice with each other so often that they know when one of their teammates is having an “off day.” Players can then make adjustments to make up for their lagging teammate. On the other hand, players who realize that they are having bad days learn to pass the ball more, or let other people attempt to score points. The key feature that makes team sports invaluable for learning this lesson is that only the whole team can win a game. One basketball player's great performance doesn't win the game if his whole team doesn't score more points than the other team. Team sports also teach us to value and appreciate teammates who outshine us, because we know that they are an integral part of the team's mission. Inversely, team sports teach star players to value all teammates, because they know that winning a game can come from any one player's ability to score or prevent a score. Winning a basketball game by one point improves your team's record by the same amount as does winning by 20 points.

3. What does it mean to learn how to lose well. How can someone lose well?

It's important to first describe what it looks like to be a “poor” or “sore” loser:

- You quit because you lost.
- You quit because you're not the best.
- You punch the referee because you lost.
- You can't celebrate other people's victories because it's not *your* victory.
- Not recognizing that you're a sore loser makes you a social porcupine that people are afraid to come near.

Now let's describe what it looks like to lose well:

- You learn to be happy for the winner, which makes you a deeper, more generous person in other areas of your life.
- You learn to be happy with your effort and to appreciate the value of who you are or what you are.
- You learn to relate to the situation of the vast majority of the people in the world, since very few people win at everything. This can make you a better friend.
- You learn from failures, and prepare to do better next time.

4. What does it mean to learn non-verbal communication?

Through playing team sports, you learn to pick up visual cues about when your teammate is demoralized or having an off day. You learn to communicate with eye-contact or physical cues. This allows you to know when to provide extra help or to back down. It helps you develop EQ, or "emotional intelligence," which is important for all aspects of life and work. This is why many former players of team sports make great managers, therapists, or CEOs.

5. What does it mean to learn to make sacrifices for the team?

Learning to make sacrifices, big or small, is a social skill that is important for gaining friends and the unspoken title of "someone who can be trusted to take care of important situations." Being unprepared and causing the team to lose allows you to learn what it means to have people be disappointed in you. This is a very important experience to know, because it's part of what prevents us from becoming destructive to the things and people around us. Learning the value of not letting our teammates down teaches us the value of sacrificing ourselves for the team.

6. What does it mean to learn to be reliable?

You learn to value people who do what they say that they will do. It could be showing up to practice or showing up to the actual competition. It's learning to not let your teammates down. It's learning how to let your teammates know that they have your full support, even if they may

not need it. It's learning to do your part for the gain of your teammates, even if you feel like you might not gain much out of it.

7. What does it mean to learn to encourage people?

Since no team always wins, and everyone has bad days, there are plenty of opportunities to learn how to encourage people. Disappointment is one of the universal experiences in life, so learning how to encourage people doesn't just make you a great friend and coworker, but

What about playing sports in which only one person performs at once, such as track & field or tennis? Can the skills that we talked about today be learned in those situations?

Sports such as track & field or tennis are considered "individual" sports, but players of these sports practice together as teams, often under the same set of coaches. In high school, schools can win against each other in track & field by adding up collective points from each event. Even though each person does one or more specific events in track & field, a group of people often train together as a team, watching each other's technique and giving helpful feedback. Thus, many of the skills that come from playing team sports can still be learned by playing single-player sports.

Where can someone learn these skills if they've never played team sports before?

Team skills can be learned in social groups and in the workplace. The nature of team sports makes playing the sport like being in a fast-paced microcosm in which everyone ages quicker and learns faster, but the actual pace of life events and deadlines at work also provide opportunities to learn these skills. Also, dance teams and theatrical groups that regularly rehearse choreographed activities are great places to learn skills about playing well on a team.

By David H. Nguyen, Ph.D.