



### **LL #72 Participation Trophies**

The Thompson (CT) Youth Recreation Basketball League single-elimination playoffs ended this week; at least for the Thompson 76ers (the team my son plays for, and I coach). For the 76ers, I believe the term is “one and done.”

At the conclusion of the regular season, the league commissioner sent me an email saying that he would be dropping off participation trophies for my team prior to our first playoff game. The following morning, while driving my son to school, I asked him what he thought about participation trophies. After thinking about it, he asked “wait, you mean we are getting a trophy just for showing up?”

“That’s ridiculous,” said Axel.

Admittedly, part of my brain was glad to hear him say it. The emotional, reptilian part. I thought “that’s right son, we don’t give a trophy just for showing up. You gotta perform! Want a trophy? Stop your cryin’ and go earn it!”



Thankfully, I also have my neocortex. The neocortex part of my brain affords me the ability to think. And after doing so, I explained to my son, Most Valuable Players should be recognized with the MVP Trophy and the team that wins the championship should get the biggest trophy of anyone. Typically, exceptional performance is a byproduct of a combination of talent, hard work, and incredible sacrifice. And those who perform best should receive the greatest reward. However, although I may hate the name of them (I would prefer “improvement”), I still love participation trophies. At least for 10-year-olds.

As I explained to my son (and to my team at McDonald’s after our crushing first-round defeat to the Pomfret Magic), I love participation trophies because every member of our team deserves to be recognized for exactly what that trophy represents: participating. It does not represent the MVP or having won a Championship and it should not. On my team, a participation trophy represents showing up. On-time. In the right uniform. With a good attitude. Prepared.

Many kids do not. Youth team participation numbers continue to drop throughout the country. Ask a teacher about school participation.

Nor do most adults. Ask employers about that. At least not in the things that we struggle or don’t like doing. Instead, we prevaricate. We have bad attitudes. We give less than our best or simply don’t do those things at all. We stay inside our comfort zone. We do the same thing day in and day out. The same sports. The same job. The same workouts (if we workout). The same friends. The same vacation. The same life. It is incredibly comfortable to do the same thing all the time. It is called our comfort zone for a reason. Unfortunately, it is also incredibly unfulfilling.

Most of the kids on the 76ers struggled to dribble when the season started. This is basketball. And they struggled... to dribble. Not run and dribble. Just dribble. But every week they participated. As the leader, I taught the importance of hard work, being on- time, in the right uniform, and prepared, but I could only do that because they showed up in the first place. At the end of the season, they struggled to dribble while running. But they could dribble while standing. And that is called improvement.

Like those who perform best, improvement also requires a combination of talent, hard work, and sacrifice. You can improve without being the MVP or winning a Championship though, and if you do so, you should also be rewarded. Not with the MVP trophy and not with the trophy that looks like you won the Championship. You did not. You *only* participated, but that is important because the toughest part of improving is not the struggle, it is the showing up to do so in the first place. It’s getting off the couch. And if those ten-year-old kids on The Thompson 76ers can continue to participate in those classes, sports, music, theater, jobs, and life opportunities where



they may struggle, they are going to end up having a really happy life. Struggle allows for growth, and happiness is a byproduct of it. We do not grow though just because we want to. Everyone wants to be a success. Everyone wants to be happy. Growth occurs when we go and do something about it. As President Theodore Roosevelt once said, “it is not the critic who counts, but the man (woman) *in* the arena.” The Thompson 76ers got beaten down, but at least we got in the ring. And I love publicly recognizing the members of my team for doing so. Hopefully, a little recognition now will help them do so again in the future.

What is something in your life that you have always wanted to do? Go and do it. And then let me know you have done so. It does not necessarily matter if you are the MVP or even if you do it well. Understand and accept that there will always be critics: it *is* easier to tear down than build up. Look no further than social media for that. You will have to deal with someone outside the arena who makes fun or mocks you and/or your poor performance. Not me. I will get you a participation trophy. It should mean something to you. A whole lot of something.

As I told the 76ers, that trophy does not represent that you are an MVP or that you won a Championship. It represents that you got in the arena. It means that you participated. You showed up. On-time. In the right uniform. With a good attitude. Prepared. You improved, maybe only a fraction at the task, but certainly as a human being. Getting outside your comfort zone does that. I am proud of you for doing so. I hope you are too.

You should be.

**PARTICIPATE!**

**Eric Kapitulik**  
Founder and CEO

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