The Difference Between Winning and Losing

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By James Leath (this first appeared on his blog at www.JamesLeath.com)

A former student athlete of mine was awarded a full ride to play NCAA D1 football and he called me recently, just to talk. Calls from former athletes are a huge highlight in any coach’s day.

“Coach, what is the difference between winning and losing?”

I think for a moment, and the scene from the movie White Men Can’t Jump pops into my head, when Gloria Clemente says: “Sometimes when you win, you actually lose, and sometimes when you lose, you really win, and sometimes when you win or lose, you actually tie, and sometimes when you tie, you actually win or lose. Winning or losing is all one organic mechanism, from which one extracts what one needs.” [LINK]

Clearing that from my head, and knowing that this must have been on his mind for a long time to be asking me so early in our conversation, I respond:

“Three inches.”

There was silence on the other end of the line. I waited. I would have waited as long as it took while he tried to figure out what his old coach was trying to tell him.

“Okay, coach, I give in. What does that mean?”

“What does it mean to you?”
“Well, if I know you well enough, you are getting deep on me right now and it doesn’t have anything to do with the scoreboard.” He knows me well.

“When was your last practice?” I ask.

“Early this morning.”

“Did you run sprints?”

“Yeah, lots.”

“Line to line?”

“Yes, I always touch the line.”

“Does everybody touch the line?”

“No, some guys get close, but they get lazy.”

I wait. I can almost hear the light bulb go on through the phone.

“Three inches is about the distance they get to the line!”

“You got it. Winning and losing is not in your control,” I explain. “Instead of concerning yourself with the score, be a competitor. Who is coming in first during the sprints? Beat them. Who stays after practice to catch a few more throws? Catch more. A competitor does not worry about the scoreboard or stats or social media fans. A competitor shows up to be the best they can be and their hunger for improvement is never satiated.”

We talked for a few more minutes, prayed together, and then he said he was going to bed. It was 8:30 pm. That isn’t a typo. 8:30 pm and this athlete is off to bed, knowing a rested athlete is an effective athlete. I pity the teammate who lined up across from him the next
This conversation reminds me of a story told by Bo Eason, a former NFL safety, on playing with legendary receiver Jerry Rice. He tells how all the veterans in training camp would run a quick pass route, turn, catch the pass, run a few steps and jog back to the line. Then, Jerry Rice would go. He would sprint out, turn on a dime, catch the pass, and sprint 80 yards to the end zone. EVERY TIME.

When Eason asked Rice why he did that, Rice responded, "Every time these hands touch that ball, the ball is going in the end zone." Considering Rice scored 197 career touchdowns — forty one more than second best — it seems like a good strategy to follow.

**Practice like a champion, and play like a champion!**

**How to develop a team of competitors**

Every coach knows you can lose with great athletes and win with average athletes. The difference is usually the size of the competitor inside each athlete. Here is one way to increase the size of the competitor in your athletes.

1. Break up your team into small groups and give them five minutes to write 10 ways they can personally compete. These items must be things they can control. Then, have them share with the team.
2. Watch your players and take note on which items got the most "head nods" from other teammates. That is a signal you don’t want to miss because those are the things your athletes know deep down they need to do in order to be great.
3. Take the cards and compile a list on one sheet of paper.
4. Post that list somewhere the athletes can see it and challenge them to pick one before every practice, but to keep it to themselves. (This works best if it is right by the door on the way to practice so they can physically “tap” it to solidify it in their mind).

Tell them you will randomly ask them during the post-practice chat what they chose as their personal challenge that day. Were they successful? Did they follow through? This only works if you, as the coach, follow through and ask a few players. To create a culture of competitors you have to be consistent in your message. Try this and let us know how it works, and if you have done something similar, please share it below.

**Because when it comes down to it, champions are made long before the lights and the crowds and the trophies. Everyone is**
motivated during the big game, but true champions are competitors in practice and in play. They have the will to compete, to train, and to prepare weeks and months before the match is even played!
The difference between winning and losing is very small. In fact, its only about three inches.
What do you think? Please share below.

James Leath is a mental conditioning coach, and the new social media director and speaker for the Changing The Game Project, and this article first appeared on his blog at www.JamesLeath.com. Click here to learn more about James.