

November 24, 2014

## Westchester Wellness

### The Psychology of Youth Sports with Tuckahoe's Dr. Alex Diaz

As kids compete year-round, are they prepared for the frustration, disappointment, and pressure that come with competing? We turned to Tuckahoe-based sports psychologist Dr. Alex Diaz for the answers.

BY ALEX DIAZ



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*Alex Diaz, PhD, practices sports psychology in Tuckahoe.*

Young student athletes face both wonderful and challenging times. Not only do they work hard to meet demanding academic requirements, they also devote long hours to sport training and competition. Most young children start playing sports for fun. Once they start participating in varsity or club teams, however, a shift takes place and frequently playing for fun becomes playing to win. Winning can be very seductive, but it puts the focus on end results rather than the process leading to success. In a culture that overemphasizes those successes, young athletes and adults alike may experience too much pressure. Consequently, the “fun” factor turns into a “job” factor.

Excelling in sports can become emotionally draining. Athletes use after-school hours for either practicing or playing matches. On

weekends, they're driven long distances to participate in tournaments. They make huge sacrifices at the expense of not sleeping enough. There's a lot of pressure on these young athletes, who need to navigate both the challenges to do well, and the disappointments that come with unmet expectations.

Some young athletes experience an emotional roller coaster during competition, which often leads to frustration and wanting to quit. Disappointments, unfairness, and "bad luck" are part of the fabric of every sport. Blaming others may be a quick reaction, but unproductive in the long run. Instead, what these young athletes need is a planned mental strategy that'll help them deal with these high-pressure situations.

Sport psychology promotes peak performance by providing psychological strategies that address emotional and environmental factors in athletes. Elite athletes overwhelmingly agree that managing their emotions is key to achieving their personal bests. They learn to fully focus on the next swing, shot, or hit. Just like top athletes, young athletes can learn to have a short-term memory to help them forget recent setbacks and a long-term memory for past successes. They may also learn to accept that they can only manage factors that are within their control.

Having a mental plan is like sailing with a compass. It allows athletes to better manage their environment. Often, these strategies translate into having a higher level of self-confidence, which, in a competitive environment, may well give the young athletes an edge to succeed. The collateral positive effect to ingraining sports mental skills is its applicability to life lessons, which is exactly what coaches and parents hope their young athletes to embrace.

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*Often, we think of sports psychology as something just for the pros. However, with the mounting pressure that young athletes feel, there's a need to learn how to cope with disappointments on the field. Alex Diaz, PhD, a sports psychologist who practices in Tuckahoe, writes about the benefits sports psychology can have for student athletes.*

*The opinions expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Westchester Magazine editorial staff.*