



Participation trophies.

I'm not a fan.

They're bad for kids. Bad for parents. Bad for society.

Other than that, they're okay.

Don't get me wrong—I love any kind of organized competition for kids. I lived and breathed baseball, basketball, football and soccer growing up. If there was a sport to be played, I played it. And never once did anybody ever tell me that winning was not important, or that showing up was all that mattered.

But today, kids get a different message: Losing? No big deal. Showing up? That deserves a trophy. Wow. What an awful thing to tell a kid. Glad my parents or coaches never said it to me. If they had, I'm sure I never would've become a pro soccer player.

Let me tell you why.

In high school, I was a good soccer player. I thought I could play soccer in college. Looking back, though, I just wasn't good enough in those college coaches' eyes.

I tried out for the UCLA team as a walk-on. I made it! I was vindicated. I had arrived...on the bench. The coach hardly ever looked at me. I'm not even sure he knew my name. I know he didn't care about my feelings. I wanted to be a starter. I wanted to be a winner. Shouldn't I have been satisfied just for making the team? Of course not! That's absurd.

But isn't that what kids are told today? You're a winner—even if you're not; even if you come in last. And we'll give you a trophy—just for showing up, just for participating.

This belief—that showing up is an accomplishment—is self-destructive. Because the pain of losing is part of what drives one to improve.

The frustration of going to game after game and sitting on the bench drove me nuts. I had to practice more. I had to work harder. Or, I had to give up. And I didn't want to give up.

This taught me an important lesson: If you don't put in the work, you won't get ahead. And not getting ahead? Well, that feels awful. So, put in the work. Or go home.

So, I put in the work. I pushed myself, not to do my best—because who can possibly know what “their best” is?—but to be better. And better.

And one day, my chance came. Coach put me in the game. Not because I wanted so badly to play, but because he needed me. I played well—well enough to start the next game, where I scored a goal and had an assist. After that, I started every game.

The road to victory—in sports, in business, in life—is paved with losses—painful losses. Losses that can hurt so much it’s hard to breathe. Any professional athlete or successful entrepreneur will tell you that’s true.

But participation trophies—everybody-is-the-valedictorian and let’s-all-pat-each-other-on-the-back awards—communicate a different message. They tell you that losing doesn’t matter. It matters. They tell you that competition is, at best, not important and, at worst, dangerous. I wonder how my soccer career would have turned out if I’d grown up with these ideas in my head.

I was cut twice during the tryout period for the 1992 Olympics. My pro soccer team, the LA Galaxy, lost three times in the championship before we finally won in 2002.

Guess what? I survived all these disappointments and a whole lot more. They only made victory that much sweeter.

In the real world, you’re rewarded for achievement—not effort. Promotions don’t go to the employees who did their best. They go to the employees who did the best.

But what if the kids can’t handle losing? What if it’s too painful? That’s the whole point. It’s your job as the adult, as the parent, to help them understand that losing—that not getting what they want—is a part of life. Nobody likes to fail, but it’s inevitable, and it’s the only path, ultimately, to success.

Yes, showing up and participating is important. Trying your best is important. But neither deserves a trophy. If you want one of those, go win something.

I’m Cobi Jones for Prager University.