

# The Most Important Thing

By: Bradley Liu

During my second year playing 10U water polo, I focused intensely on performing to the best of my ability in every game, aiming to contribute to my team's overall success. Winning was always a goal I worked toward, and I understood its importance in the competitive world of sports. Yet, there was one particular matchup that has stuck with me to this day. Our team managed to dominate the opposing side, playing confidently and effectively throughout the game. As the match ended and we proceeded with the customary handshake, I found myself reflecting on the way most of our team celebrated the win, particularly the behavior exhibited by some of my teammates.

The coaches, despite the obvious dominance in the game, demonstrated remarkable sportsmanship. They offered encouraging words to our players, acknowledging their efforts while maintaining a sense of humility. They never let the outcome cloud their perspective on the value of playing the game with respect. Yet, despite the professionalism shown by the coaching staff, I couldn't help but notice the contrast in attitudes from some of my teammates. Before, after the final whistle, we gathered on the pool deck and bragged about our victory, as I began to sense a shift in the tone of celebration. Some of my teammates were openly boasting, almost as if they were flaunting our victory in front of the other team. They loudly proclaimed our superiority, bragging about how effortless the win had been. It was clear they were more focused on belittling the other team than on acknowledging the challenges we had faced throughout the match.

What initially felt like a thrilling and well-earned victory quickly soured in my mind. I had always celebrated team victories because they represented a collective effort, where everyone contributed to the success. Yet, as the atmosphere shifted to one of arrogance, I began to feel uneasy. Rather than feeling pride in our teamwork and the effort we had put in to earn the win, I began questioning whether my teammates truly respected the other team. Was the other team's effort meaningless? Did they not deserve acknowledgement for their hard work? I thought about all the times we had lost and how we, too, had put everything we had into the game. The idea of belittling an opponent just because we won didn't sit right with me.

At that moment, I began to reevaluate how we, as a team, should conduct ourselves after the post-game handshake. The way we celebrated the victory seemed to contradict everything I had believed about the essence of sportsmanship. Sportsmanship, after all, isn't just about how we behave when we lose—it's equally important when we win. As much as I wanted to savor the feeling of victory, I realized that our conduct after the game was just as significant as our performance during it. Winning should never be an opportunity to diminish others, but rather a chance to celebrate our collective effort, while showing respect for those who participated in the game. In my mind, it was essential to remember that every game, regardless of the outcome, is an opportunity for mutual respect and recognition.

Later on, a coach from the opposing team approached our team and, with genuine sincerity, said, "Great game, you guys played well." That simple yet meaningful remark resonated deeply with me. It was a reminder that, even in victory, it is crucial to demonstrate respect and appreciation for the other team's hard work. The coach's words served as a powerful reminder that sports are not about putting others down, but rather about acknowledging the game itself—the effort, passion, and commitment of all those involved. The competition is not just about the final score, but about the mutual respect shared among athletes, coaches, and teams. Despite all this, our team was still thrilled with the "insane" (in their thoughts) domination. They kept saying, "What a win!" while some teammates, with respect, showed sportsmanship to the other team and coaches by not gloating about our victory against the other team.

This experience prompted me to reconsider our team's approach to sportsmanship, especially after a win. While I still had an immense desire to achieve victory and to strive for excellence, I came to realize that it is equally important to remain humble and show respect, regardless of the outcome. Since that moment, I have made it a point to celebrate victories with my team in a way that honors everyone involved, including our opponents. I no longer see a win as a reason to boast or to elevate myself or my teammates above others. Instead, I view it as a shared celebration of the effort and perseverance of everyone who took part. After all, the way we treat others, whether in victory or defeat, is a reflection of our true character. It's not just about the titles we achieve or the games we win, but about how we conduct ourselves with integrity and humility along the way.

As I continued playing water polo and as I moved into different levels of competition, this lesson still stayed with me. Sportsmanship became just as much a part of my identity as the desire to win. It's a mindset that I now strive to pass on to younger teammates—teaching them not only how to win with grace but also how to lose with dignity and respect. Ultimately, sports are about growth, both individually and as a team. It's about learning to handle success with humility and handling setbacks with resilience. Plus, more than anything, it's about recognizing that each game, whether a victory or a loss, is a shared experience that deserves mutual respect.