

Is Winning Really The Only Thing?

By Melvin F. Wright, Jr.

As a youngster playing sports at the Boy's Club in the 1950s, I remember a prominently displayed sign that read, "It is not whether you win or lose, but how you play the game." (Author unknown) Coaches and parents encouraged the kids to give their best effort, but to accept the fact that both sides could not win. If you gave your best, the final score was not the most important thing. However, we Americans are very competitive and accepting defeat or second place is not easy. One of my best friends was very competitive and got fighting mad if he lost or came in second – in spite of words of encouragement from coaches and parents. The thrill of competition and learning the skills needed to play the game often did not seem as fulfilling as winning.

In the 1960s, a coach by the name of Vince Lombardi changed American sports and society with a philosophy centered only on winning. The quotation which is so often attributed to Coach Lombardi is, "Winning is not everything, it is the only thing!" (Although the actual quote is "Winning isn't everything-but wanting to win is.")* The hard work, discipline, and dedication of Lombardi's Green Bay Packers resulted in five NFL championships and two Super Bowls, and many Americans began to believe that winning and coming in first was the only acceptable position. Our society became obsessed with winning. We first noticed this attitude in the sports world, but soon we found it in the business world, in the legal profession, and in every corner of our society.

As we focused more on winning, we focused less on character development, civility, and professionalism. Athletic teams and their fans judge the quality of the coach by the number of wins rather than the character of the players. Has this attitude of "winning at all costs" served us well? Are we now better off as a result of this change in attitude? We certainly have greater technology, faster cars, bigger airplanes and more charge cards. But according to many studies, we are more depressed, more overweight, more suicidal, and less likely to be happy in our workplace than ever before. Rudeness, road rage, and sarcasm are all too common in our everyday lives. Can good character, civility and professionalism make a difference in our lives? Absolutely, but it is going to require great effort on everyone's part. In the legal arena, lawyers need to focus on truth and justice, rather than simply winning. When the emotional client comes into the office and announces that he/she wants the meanest lawyer in town and he/she will pay whatever it takes to win, the lawyer needs to assure the client that the best legal representation will be afforded, but the ultimate goal is to ensure that justice is served. If justice is served, then everyone, including the legal system, wins. Lawyers must educate the public concerning the quest for justice and truth rather than just winning. This is not an easy task considering the many movies, television shows, and media sources that focus on winning alone.

* www.vincelombardi.com/quotes/index.html

Hypothetically, imagine a case in which a lawyer is representing a client who is seeking money damages for personal injuries. The attorney representing the plaintiff knows that the defense will ask questions in the plaintiff's deposition and at trial concerning the plaintiff's shady background. The truth may lessen the value of the case in the minds of the jury. If the client takes an evasive position and responds to pointed direct questions, "I don't recall" or "I can't remember", what is the lawyer's duty? If the purpose of our legal system is to seek justice, and not to win at all costs, the choice is not difficult. The lawyer must advise the client to be honest and to let the chips fall where they may. If the focus of all lawyers and clients is to seek the truth, justice will be served and the legal system wins.

Chief Justice I. Beverly Lake, Jr. believes that the professionalism effort in North Carolina is important for lawyers and the public. Lawyers may not win all their cases, but they can act professionally in every case. If you are competent in your work, honest in your endeavors, have justice as your ultimate goal, and always act civilly towards the Court, other lawyers, and the public, you will help rekindle the deserved respect for our profession. Treat every client as if their case is the most important in your office and ensure that you are a zealous advocate on their behalf. Gradually, each client and person with whom you come in contact will realize that winning is not the only thing, but character, civility, and professionalism, in the pursuit of justice, are much more important to our profession, to the citizens of North Carolina, and to the entire judicial process.