

*****SECOND PLACE*****
Sportsmanship: Appreciating The Competition
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Today, sportsmanship is a concept too often misunderstood. It is easy to view the most important accomplishment in a sport as defeating your current opponent, and thus allow yourself to do anything to succeed. Such a mentality is an oversimplification. Indeed, winning is an important goal to have, but how that goal is accomplished makes all the difference. Sportsmanship can be plainly described as a demonstration of respect for a sport and its participants through ethical behavior. But to genuinely understand this idea and put it into practice is to understand the true meaning of all athletic competition.

The sport of wrestling has taught me many lessons since I began in the third grade. But it took until my sophomore year for me better comprehend the meaning of sportsmanship. In wrestling, opponents shake hands before and after each match. Despite eight years in the sport, I never understood the handshake ritual, and often dismissed it as simply ceremonial. My attitude changed in my sophomore year, when I was fortunate enough to find myself in the league finals, taking on a familiar opponent. I had faced him on two earlier occasions, and lost both times. Defeating an opponent who had beaten me twice before in the league tournament finals showed me, for the first time in eight years of wrestling, why I shake my opponent's hand. He had challenged me to become a better wrestler. It was because of him that I was able to train harder and reach a higher level of ability. I shake his hand because I am grateful for the opposition, and because I respect the work he has done to become such a formidable opponent.

Many athletes view their competitors as obstacles preventing them from attaining that coveted championship trophy, but sportsmanship is about appreciating your opponent for who and what they really are. An accomplishment's significance is based on the steps taken to achieve it. It was the months of hard work in practice that made the league championship so gratifying, not the six minutes I spent on the mat. They only showed me that I had improved. Truly understanding sportsmanship is understanding that although winning is the desired result, the real value of athletics lies within the process of working to succeed. The tougher the opposition, the more they motivate me to try to become a better wrestler, and the more I respect them for it.

Sportsmanship must be a code of values displayed consistently by athletes both on and off the field. To assume a different code of conduct outside of the athletic arena is not only hypocritical, but it weakens the message of an athletic leader. Those who exemplify good sportsmanship understand that adhering to rules of good character allows for more meaningful accomplishments not only in athletics, but also in all of life's other endeavors.