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Bob Cook Contributor

I write about youth sports.

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Participation Trophies Aren't What's Wrong With Kids These Days

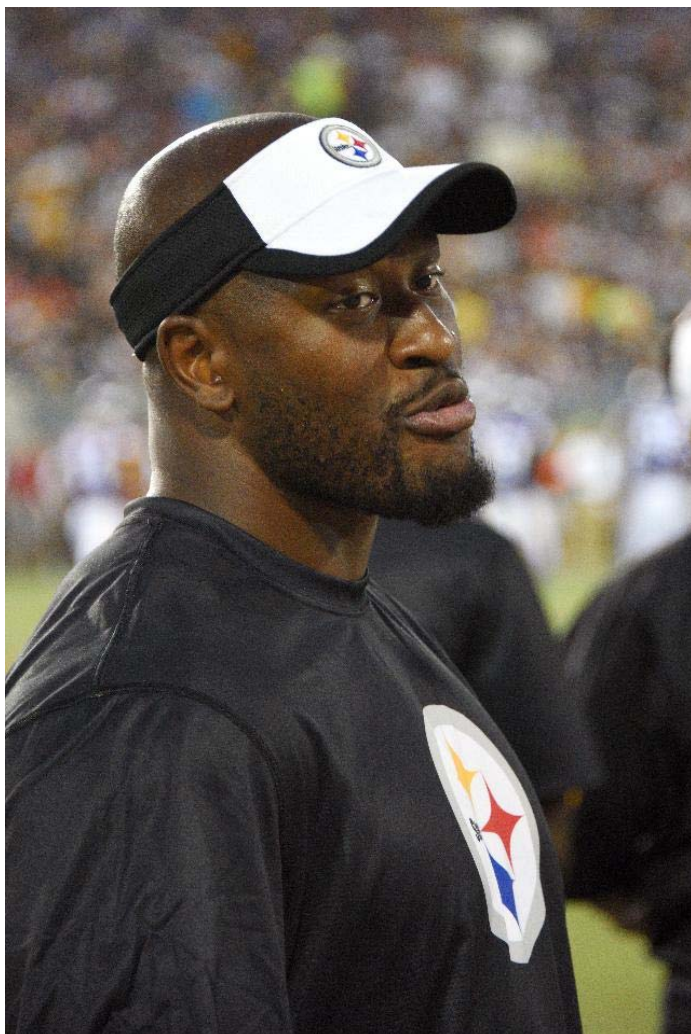
The debate over whether children are ruined when every participant in a sport gets a trophy is one of the most overdone and overrated in youth sports. We're what, 20 years into this, and the end result, as far as I can see it, is that the kids still know who won or lost, and the parents are stuck trying to figure out where to put the dang hardware until it just disappears in a drawer or memory bin somewhere.

Yet here we are again talking about this, because James Harrison of the Pittsburgh Steelers brought all the everybody-gets-a-trophy haters back for another round of Our Children Are Going Soft by posting on Instagram a photo of participation trophies received by his 8-year-old and 6-year-old sons, along with [this jeremiad](#):

“ I came home to find out that my boys received two trophies for nothing, participation trophies! While I am very proud of my boys for everything they do and will encourage them till the day I die, these trophies will be given back until they EARN a real trophy. I'm sorry I'm not sorry for believing that everything in life should be earned and I'm not about to raise two boys to be men by making them believe that they are entitled to something just because they tried their best...cause sometimes your best is not enough, and that should drive you to want to do better...not cry and whine until somebody gives you something to shut u up and keep you happy. [#harrisonfamilyvalues](#)

Yikes, James, you might not want to bring up Harrison Family Values when you've [had a domestic abuse issue in your past](#). But back to the trophies.





Pittsburgh Steelers outside linebacker James Harrison (92) stands on the sidelines during the first half of an NFL preseason football game against the Minnesota Vikings in Canton, Ohio, Sunday, Aug. 9, 2015. (AP Photo/Don Wright)

Harrison's stance that participation trophies are Satan's awards echoes a recent piece on HBO's "Real Sports with Bryant Gumbel," in which Bernard Goldberg, [often a fine reporter](#), is in his full, alter-ego [100 People Who Are Ruining America](#) mode as he points out (about 25 years too late) the dangers of just letting any kid get recognition. His sneering intro, with seemingly innocent shots of single-digit-aged kids playing soccer in the background, is worthy of The Daily Show. I imagine [Jason Jones' voice](#):

“It's the final day of the season of a youth sports league outside Tampa, Fla., and while you might think you're just looking at kids playing games — you're actually looking at a lot more. Nothing less, in fact, than a seismic shift in American culture — a culture that miraculously embraces nothing but winners.”

This is my favorite part, talking about all the people who see participation trophies paving the road to unearned self-esteem hell:

“It's not just a few critics who think this is all wrong — IT'S ALSO SCIENTISTS IN WHITE LAB COATS.”

Not just scientists. Ones in white lab coats — the universal sign of flawless thinking.

As a parent and former youth coach, I just can't get all worked up about participation trophies, either way. They've become so ingrained into the fabric of youth sports that they're just another part of the youth sports wallpaper, like the post-game snack. (My word, [don't get people started on that, either.](#)) To me, the bigger problem is not giving kids trophies — [it's making trophies out of your kids.](#) The real damage, I think, comes from parents who are pushing their children too hard [toward a scholarship or pro career](#), and let their identities and family dynamics become wrapped up in that pursuit.

When it comes to participation trophies, in my experience kids know the score. Really, like when I coached a no-score basketball league when my oldest son was in second grade, he and his teammates would share with each other what the score was. The question is, how do you as a parent accurately assess your child's interest and ability in a sport, and how do you communicate with your child with the goal of helping him or her find the sports — or activities, or academic pursuits — that he or she can make into a viable career, or into a healthy lifetime of casual participation? How do you help your child transition from when sports are all about participation into a [level where it becomes more competitive](#) — including helping them identify when they have reached that level?

I liked this [summation](#) from sports mom and softball coach [Stacie Mahoe](#) regarding the worthlessness of getting worked up over participation trophies:

“ People, seriously...

Whether your kids get a trophy for participation or not does not determine their attitude toward hard work or earning their way. YOUR attitude toward those things is a far bigger influence than any piece of wood and plastic. ...

All of my kids that have played any kind of sport have all gotten trophies (yes more than one) just for participation and we enjoyed the experience of the season, including our kids' delight to have something with their name on it that belonged to THEM and no one else in our home. Something to represent and remember the fun and learning took place during that period of their life.

To date, I have a child who was offered a full ride athletic scholarship to college. That same child also set various world records in her current sport and holds various state and American records too. I have two other children who hold state and American records in that same sport. ...

Those things don't happen for kids who just whine and cry until someone gives them what they want. A trophy given as a gift doesn't cause or prevent that as some people seem to think/ imply.

It's nice to have something as simple as a participation trophy to blame for less than desirable attitudes of "kids these days," but the real issues aren't magically fixed simply by removing a trophy from the picture.

I'm not sure what times were like when you were growing up, but even *I* got a ton of trophies and certificates and medals for "participation." That doesn't mean I expect everything to be handed to me on a silver platter. Because the trophy is not the problem, nor removal of it the all encompassing "answer."

YOUR thoughts, attitudes, values, and beliefs show in your life and your kids learn a lot through what they live with you. A trophy doesn't have any of that. ...

I'll add one more thing. In 2015, for the first time in 50 years, [the majority of public school students come from low-income families](#). Given how the expense of sports can squeeze out a lot of families, and there are a lot that can be squeezed out, [perhaps a participation trophy IS well-earned](#).

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