

Winning and having fun are not mutually exclusive.

Many prominent athletes, particularly following a bout of health crisis (e.g., Michael Phelps, Caeleb Dressel, Simone Manuel, and Simone Biles), have been vocal about the importance FUN in finding their way back to sport, competition, and performance success.

In general, fun is both defined as, and associated with lighthearted pleasure, amusement, joking around, and boisterous trickery (Oxford English Dictionary, 2023). When it comes to sport participation, however, youth athletes tend to define fun differently. What makes sport fun for youth athletes is not “fun and games” or the medals and the “swag”, but rather working hard, great teammates, and coaches and parents who create a positive sport culture.

Key characteristics of positive coaches who make sport fun (Vissek et al., 2015)

1. Treating athletes with respect
2. Encouraging the team
3. Being a positive role model
4. Clear, consistent communication
5. Sport knowledge
6. Allowing mistakes while staying positive
7. Listening to players and taking athletes opinions into consideration
8. Easy to talk to
9. Being nice and friendly
10. Gives compliments to athletes
11. Participation with athletes during practice
12. Joking around

To put it simply, for sport to be fun, children are not expecting participation trophies, or goofing around. Instead, they want to learn new skills, work hard, and feel their effort and intensity is valued by the adults around them.

And neither are elite athletes! Indeed, elite athletes have repeatedly demonstrated that having fun and performing at the highest level can and do exist hand in hand. Most notably, both Simone Manuel and Simone Biles have been vocal about both – and have performance outcomes to back it all up.

SCIENCE FACT:

Children cite 'fun' as the primary reason for participation in organized sport and its absence as the number one reason for youth sport attrition. (Visek et al., 2015, p. 424).



"I measure my success in how much fun I am having. That's a cool, special, refreshing, and liberating feeling."

(2024 Pro Swim Series, March 10, 2024)

"I really wanted to channel that 'Simone' because I know I am a winner."

(2024 US Olympic Trials, June 23, 2024)

Critical Questions:

What makes sport fun for me?

What makes sport fun for my athletes?

How do I, as a coach cultivate my athlete's sense of fun in sport?

Are my behaviors consistent positive coaching behaviors (see above) that have been found to be associated with fun in sport by athletes?

Pidä Hauskaa – Have Fun!

Monna: My daughter Amie swims competitively. When she was 10 years old, she qualified for finals (top 16) in a meet that included swimmers of all ages from three different states. On the Saturday afternoon of the finals, I dropped her off to the warm-ups, leaving her with her coach. As a swim mom does, I headed to the bleachers to watch her perform. Amie swam her race, achieved a new best time, and then headed to the dressing room to change. While her coach and I waited for Amie to come out from the dressing room, the coach said to me, “pidä hauskaa.” Surprised, I responded, “So Amie’s been teaching you Finnish?” The coach nodded and explained, “To kill time between the warm-up and her swim, I asked Amie to teach me a few common phrases in Finnish, like thank you, yes, and no.” From Amie’s club, only she and one other older swimmer had qualified. This meant that while waiting for her event, she did not have her usual swim friends around to talk to. Her coach went on to say, “I also asked her, how do you say good luck? She hesitated and said, ‘I don’t know.’ Then I asked her, well what does your mom say to you before your swim meets? She responded, - pidä hauskaa – it means have fun.” I smiled and nodded. “That’s right. I never wish her good luck, instead – to have fun. I don’t wish her good luck because it would imply that her own skills are not good enough and that she needs luck in order to succeed. On the other hand, by telling her to have fun means that I, as a parent, want her to enjoy swimming and have fun while racing. This way, without added pressure from me, or the sentiment that what she’s done to prepare for this race is not enough, she can confidently just do her thing. If she continues to have fun, I know that she will continue to grow in her development as a swimmer.”

Amanda: Even though the literature is replete with evidence that fun plays a significant and vital role in the experience of an athlete, its importance cannot be underscored enough. Fun is what keeps young athletes playing (Gardner, Magee, & Vella, 2016) – and, for those with high performance aspirations, it helps fuel them in their pursuit of sport excellence (Snyder, 2014). According to the fun integration theory’s FUN MAPS (Visek, Achrati, Mannix, Chandran, McDonnell, & DiPietro, 2015), informed and developed directly by young athletes, parents are indeed a contributing source of fun, namely in the form of the encouragement and support they provide. Importantly then, what parents say to their young athletes, and when they say it, can be profoundly impactful. For parents, though, knowing what to say to their young athletes before, during, and even after practices and competitions is not always so clear to them. “Pidä hauskaa” illustrates clear, simple messaging consistent with athletes’ moment-to-moment sport need, that is, to have fun.

Fun is derived from specific actions and behaviors, of which the FUN MAPS illustrate 81, the majority of which are process-oriented determinants. Among them, young athletes report that the most important are those that underpin factors including Trying Hard, Positive Team Dynamics, and Positive Coaching (Visek, Mannix, Chandran, Cleary, McDonnell, & DiPietro, in review). Outcome-oriented determinants, such as winning (Mental Bonuses) and earning trophies and medals (Swag), though fun, are not what they report as being most important. Instead, it is working hard, competing, playing well, being supported by teammates, and coaching that allows mistakes through learning. These are just some of the fun-determinants that are among the most important to young athletes. For parents, the difference between saying “have fun” or “good luck” (which is focused on the outcome of their performance, rather than the process), and asking them after practice or a meet “what was fun” versus asking them “did you win” or “how did you place”, sets young athletes’ expectations for what they will take away as being of paramount importance to their parents. What parents say and how they say it, whether on the field, sidelines, car rides to and from practices and competitions, and even at home will shape a young athlete’s sport experience. Simply put, words matter.

Amie: Ever since I can remember, my mom has always said “pidä hauskaa” to me before I go to practice, to school, to orchestra concert, to tumbling practice, or to a swim meet. Everywhere I go, really. Afterwards, she asks if I had fun. My mom says that to all my friends too when we are giving them a ride to practice or a meet, but usually then she says it in English. I am now 15 years old and a freshman in high school. I train about 16-18 hours a week (some days I swim doubles) and this year I qualified for the National Club Swimming Association Junior Nationals held in Orlando. I really like my coach, my swim friends, and swimming. It is just fun. Until now, I don’t think I have ever really thought about why my mom says “pidä hauskaa”, it has always just been that way. But, it is nice to know that she wants me to have fun doing what I do and that she does not expect medals or best times.

(Excerpt from Arvinen-Barrow et al., 2020, pp. 146-148).