

The Competitive Edge

Making competition safe and beneficial for your campers.



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INTRODUCTION

With 40 boys ages 7 to 17 years old living together for a week we already have a certain level of naturally occurring competitiveness at camp. Add to that how our program is focused on games and sports to encourage our campers to be fully active children, and you can see how competition and competitiveness is an important consideration for us.

These are some of the techniques we use at Camp High Hopes to plan for competitive activities in our program. These techniques can apply to many activities, although they focus primarily on sports as the activities most likely to need thoughtful planning to insure the competition benefits the campers.

The Benefits of Competition

By making an activity competitive (i.e. participants strive against each other for victory) you add significance to the outcome of the activity. This added significance can stimulate the interest of campers in the activity. Interested campers are more likely to try new activities, or try activities they normally shy away from. Competition can also motivate participants to try harder at an activity than they otherwise might have. Campers who try harder will learn more about the activity as they participate in it. They also learn to challenge themselves, thereby discovering more about their own capabilities and talents. Team competitions teach campers the value of teamwork, and provide opportunities to foster bonding between campers as well as staff members.

But victory and the satisfaction it brings (a sense of accomplishment, recognition by others, prizes, etc.) isn't the only allure of competition. Just the chance to be able to strive for victory - particularly against one's peers - can be a powerful force that draws campers to compete.

Losing is also an opportunity to teach campers a valuable lesson. Disappointment is a fact of life, especially for those faced with the limitations imposed by a bleeding disorder. In the supportive environment of camp you can teach your campers how to face losing, that to really succeed they need to accept their loss, to not personalize it, to learn from it, and to keep trying - in other words, to be good sports.

Competition must be genuine to have benefits. It's tempting to "manage" competition to avoid the hurt feelings competition can cause, (not keeping score, giving some campers more chances than others, altering an activity to guarantee success). This is understandable since camp is about having fun. BUT most campers will realize what you're doing, at which point they'll lose most interest in the activities and respect for you.

First, insure a balance:

We make sure to have plenty of non-competitive activities that are otherwise as interesting or rewarding as the competitive activities. We also make certain the campers understand that while there is a time for competition, these activities are not it. This helps to avoid creating an atmosphere of constant competition which will only exaggerate everyone's sense of competitiveness.

Non-competitive activities remind our campers of the value of fun for the sake of fun. They also provide an outlet for those campers not especially adept at, physically limited from, or interested in the competitive activities.

The "fruits" of victory:

By this we mean awarding recognition (certificates, medals, trophies, etc.) and prizes (clothing, toys, etc.) for achieving success in an activity.

1) The "size" of an award must be in proportion to the accomplishment for which it's given to insure the award has the desired significance to the camper. Paper certificates for the winners of a 5 game soccer series may not seem to properly recognize the effort it took to win. Giving certificates to everyone who scores means you need trophies for the teams. And if there's more than one award for the same accomplishment (i.e. 1st, 2nd, & 3rd place) they too need to be kept in proportion. A foot tall trophy for 3rd place means you need a 3 foot trophy for 1st.

2) The amount of recognition and other awards given directly affects their significance to the campers. Constantly giving recognition/ awards will lessen their significance, and the sense of accomplishment the campers feel for performing the deed being recognized. Campers who constantly receive recognition and/or awards will come to expect them, and eventually see it as nothing special at all.

3) The value of prizes will affect the campers focus on an activity. If the 1st place prize for a foot race is a video game, then the race is all about getting the game. And if it's a nice game, they'll be tripping each other to cross the line first. But if you "pump" the baseball game, and then offer the winners those paper certificates, they aren't going to be hitting many long balls.

We give recognition sparingly, and try to make the recognition relatable to the activity, such as medals for the Olympics, etc. A standout player in a single football game might get the game ball. We rarely give prizes because they so often divert too much attention away from other aspects of an activity.

We've found that if the campers had a lot of fun doing something, then just the public recognition of success by their peers - "being able to have bragging rights" - is often more than enough of a reward for most campers.

Single events vs. a series.

By making an activity part of a series (of like activities - 3 game baseball playoff, or linked activities - an Olympiad of a boat race, scavenger hunt, and trivia quiz) we can lessen the significance of the outcome of individual activities, and therefore the competitive intensity of the participants in that activity.

There is a trade off though. When we reach the final and deciding activity of a series the level of competitive intensity is certain to be higher.

Know what tone to set.

When the campers arrive we determine how inclined they are to be competitive during team try outs and the first night activity. By learning what "mood" they're in we get an idea of how much emphasis to place on the competitive aspects of activities to maintain the campers interest and effort.

We've found it's far easier to start out with a modest emphasis on the competition and then "ratchet it up" as we go along, rather than to start out highly competitive and try to tone things down when they get out of hand.

Moderating contact.

Engaged interaction between with staff members and campers gives us a more reliable sense of the campers level of competitive intensity and an ability to moderate this intensity. So we assign each team staff member coaches who guide the campers through activities, offer them the chance to practice for activities, and guide their sportsmanlike conduct.

Should a team's coaching staff have a problem with individual players (behaves poorly, needs practice, etc.) they have the authority to immediately address the situation. If the coaches observe problems with an activity or the series as a whole (poor rules, not challenging enough, etc.) they alert the Camp Director so changes can be made to the activity/series.

Good officiating.

We make certain all participants understand the rules of an activity before it begins, especially for new activities or activities where we've adapted the rules. Then we have plenty of staff member officials (more eyes to see more). The officials make a point of being consistent, fair, and firm. Severe penalties are imposed for unsportsmanlike conduct (especially arguing with the officials). Since these infractions are a typical sign of frustration, we can more readily detect the problem and take steps to correct it.

The right challenge for the challenger.

We choose activities at a level of difficulty commensurate with the relative abilities of the participants, and/or adapt the activity accordingly. We might use a smaller soccer field for the youngest campers. Or we might save the hardest trivia questions for the oldest (and presumably most educated) campers.

This doesn't mean we want to guarantee the campers will succeed (which removes the element of challenge). We just want them to have a realistic chance for success, and to be able to see that. Conversely, if an activity is seen as too easy the campers won't take it seriously.

The sports and games we play are chosen based on feedback we receive from the campers and staff (so we know they have a basic interest in them).

Build strong teams.

Linking activities together in a series, and keeping campers on the same teams through the series helps the campers bond in a strong team. We also help the campers develop their sense of team identity with team names, colors, banners, and jerseys (which the campers pick) team rallies, and such. Having campers make their own banners and jerseys is also a handy craft activity.

When campers strongly identify with their membership on a team they encourage and help their team mates during the activities (and beyond). Teams with a strong sense of team identity are also far more likely to self-regulate their behavior as well because of the group bond they feel.

Matching the competitors.

We've found it crucial to evenly match campers as contestants in competitive events to reinforce the idea participants have a sporting chance, (where victory depends more on your efforts than factors beyond your control). If the campers feel a contest is obviously unevenly matched they become frustrated and either lose interest or act out at this "unfairness".

- 1) We assign campers to teams instead of letting the campers pick sides because the natural tendency of most campers is to pick a team with obvious advantages, and not to insure both sides have a sporting chance for success.
- 2) When the campers first arrive, our Medical Staff makes an assessment of each camper's current capacity for physical activity. (They also try to assess mental capacity, but obviously such an assessment will be limited.) Key concerns are joint/muscle damage, target sites, other limitations (asthma, etc), and any physical restrictions imposed by these conditions.

3) We hold “team tryouts” for all of the campers. Tryouts consist of a series of simple activities which test basic physical abilities such as speed (running sprints), agility (running an obstacle course), throwing (at a target or to another person), kicking (into a goal) etc. Tryout tests are related to skills used in the activities that year - kicking and running for soccer, etc.

The staff members assigned to serve as team coaches moderate the tryouts, tabulate the results, and meet with the Medical Staff (who have conducted their assessment of the campers) to assign the campers to their teams.

With a camper population of widely varying physical abilities we divide them into two teams (half the campers on each team) and each team into two squads (older/bigger campers on one squad, and younger/smaller campers on the other). The older squads only face each other, and the younger squads each other. The squads can also exist as their own teams.

4) We watch for personal rivalries when matching contestants and choosing teams. Rivalries usually serve to intensify competition.

Use competition to build leaders.

The challenge of competitive activities can help to develop strength of character in campers, particularly the quality of leadership. We look for those campers with leadership potential at all ages and make them player captains / co-captains. Campers who develop leadership skills this way often transfer their leadership role (knowingly or not) to other areas of camp life.

Camper leaders can be a powerful influence on the behavior of other campers both on the field and off. These camper leaders are prime candidates for junior counselor programs and eventual staff membership.

CONCLUSION

Overly competitive campers and uncontrolled competition in activities can quickly become a serious detriment to the enjoyment safety of campers. But artificially controlled competition can be equally detrimental as it undermines the campers interest in the activities and respect for you.

However, the right amount of thoughtfully planned competition can enhance your program and benefit your campers. Competition can generate interest in activities and motivate the campers; they can learn more about the activities and themselves even as they have fun. And at the same time you can provide the campers with a productive outlet for their natural drive to compete while keeping them safe.