

Leadership in Individual Sports?

Thursday I gave a leadership presentation to the junior class at Colorado Academy. C.A. is an excellent private independent day school in Denver. Because the school is attended by pre-kindergarten through high school seniors, there are many opportunities for mentoring and leadership at C.A. Near the end of my speech I opened up the floor for questions like I usually do, but this time I got a question that I hadn't heard before. A young man asked me "How can I be a leader in my sport when it's an individual sport, I'm a wake boarder?"

Many of the popular sports that young people are attracted to are "individual" sports but that doesn't mean that contestants can't be leaders. The popularity of the X Games that are going on in Aspen right now is a prime example of that growth. Snowboarder Shaun White is a great example of a leader in an individual sport. White won the gold medal at the last Olympics and took gold at the last two X Games. He won gold again this year even though he took a scary looking face plant on a practice run an hour before the competition. Young snowboarders across the world follow his exploits and are amazed by the new tricks that he comes up with. This year he broke out a new move called the Double McTwist 12. White has not only taken his sport to new heights by leading the way in innovations in the air, but he has popularized his sport through his snowboarding video games, and through his amazing ability to connect with young snowboarders worldwide.

Obviously my C.A. wake boarder is not in Shaun White's category yet, but he is still a leader in his sport. How he acts and relates to other wake boarders determines whether that leadership is positive or negative. Less experienced wake boarders will watch how he interacts with his driver, coach, and his competitors. They will notice his language, dress, and how hard he trains. Is his commitment to wake boarding consistent and clear? Is he involved in the wake boarding community? Is he involved in instruction or associations passing his knowledge down to them and learning from the masters? Even in individual sports like snowboarding and wake boarding competitors are leaders and should take that leadership role seriously. After all they have had their heroes too. No one gets to the competitive level in a sport without the help, tutelage, and example of others.

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