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HEADLINE: 'Mastery of skill' key for kids' coaches

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COLUMN: YOUTH SPORTS SPOTLIGHT

Jim Thompson had written a pair of books and founded a national organization dedicated to youth sports, yet felt he had more to say. He did so in his third book, "The Double-Goal Coach."

Thompson felt a win-at-all-cost mentality, so often seen on television and read in the newspapers, had trickled down from the professional level.

"That model has filtered down to high school and youth sports, and coaches really subconsciously adopt that model without understanding that it's not the right model for coaching youths," Thompson said.

In "The Double-Goal Coach," Thompson attempts to change the model. Instead of winning, he stresses "mastery of skill," meaning trying one's hardest.

In the book, Thompson wrote of a study regarding the 2000 Olympics, which showed that the athletes who tried to master their respective skills were more successful than the athletes who tried to win.

The mastery of skill is part of Thompson's ELM tree: effort, learning, mistakes.

"You control your effort, you control your learning, and you control how you respond to your mistakes," the California resident said. "You can't control whether you win or not. That depends a lot on the competition and other things. You want kids to work really hard and give their all, and they feel they're in control of their own development. Mastery does that.

"When I was coaching high school basketball, I came up with the slogan: $S = E$ over T , which is 'success comes from effort over time.' If you keep working on stuff, you're going to be successful."

Thompson said the ELM approach applies to one's profession as well. The difference in sports, though, is that "there isn't a Super Bowl for attorneys."

"In sports, it appears there's only one winner," the 59-year-old said. "But that's really not what happens in life. You don't have to be the best. You can be the very best you can be and do really well. That's the mastery approach: Work really hard at what you're doing, and you're going to get better."

Effort, learning and responding to mistakes are all controllable actions, which takes pressure off young athletes.

"Youth coaches and high school coaches don't need to get a Ph.D. in sports psychology, but they should know that the research from sports psychologists show that if you focus on mastery, your kids are going to do better than if you have them focus on winning a game," Thompson said.

A chapter was also dedicated to a player's "Emotional Tank."

"The basic idea is that we all have an emotional tank, which is similar to that of a gas tank in a car," said Thompson, who coached his son in youth sports. "If your car's tank is empty, you're not going to drive very far. If your players' emotional tanks are empty, they aren't going to perform very well."

"Here's where I think professional coaches are the worse role models for youth coaches."

Coaching, teammates and parents all play roles on whether a player's Emotional Tank is filling up or draining. Thompson said teams that have players with full Emotional Tanks are often successful.

"The Double-Goal Coach" also addresses how coaches can deal with difficult parents and players.

After writing his first book, *Positive Coaching: Building Character and Self-Esteem Through Sports*, Thompson started the Positive Coaching Alliance in 1998, with the goal of transforming the "culture of youth sports and make it a positive character building experience for every kid. The key is for coaches to see that they are character educators, not as mini-professional coaches."

Thompson stressed that Positive Coaching Alliance isn't a 'let's all have fun' organization, saying "We're not anti-criticism at all. We need criticism. For athletes, part of being on a team is you learn to accept criticism. (But) a coach needs to give criticism in a way that it doesn't drain a kid's tank. When you fill a kid's tank, they are more likely to take your criticism and use it."

For more information on Positive Coaching Alliance, go to www.positivecoach.org