CENTER VALLEY – Last week in sports brought a confluence of competitions to center stage. Two NCAA basketball championships capped a month of madness. Golf in Augusta, Georgia featured the Masters of the links. The Lehigh Valley IronPigs evoked squeals of delight with their inaugural home opener. (And, for those still interested, the NHL began its season of playoffs.)

Whether through fans watching or players participating, the sporting phenomenon holds a powerful influence, especially among young people. A recent report from American Sports Data, Inc. indicates that of the more than 42 million participants in sports, two-thirds are under age 25.

The value of the games people play goes beyond entertainment and business. As a cultural phenomenon, sport provides a means for human development that has a uniquely global reach. Promoting personal traits such as teamwork, discipline, and sacrifice, sport also aids in social solidarity by transcending economic and political boundaries. Despite the protests currently spawning around its perennial flame, the Olympic Games disclose sport’s humanistic dimension. As its creed aptly states, “The most important thing … is not to win but to take part just as the most important thing in life is not the triumph, but the struggle.”

Unfortunately, it seems that the struggle itself is no longer that important. For today’s youth, competition is giving way to mere participation. Researchers with the Institute for the Study of Youth Sports at Michigan State University report that having fun is the most important reason
why children participate in sport. Striving to win as a motivation ranks no higher than eighth for school-sponsored athletes and is not listed at all by non-school sport participants.

For children of elementary and even secondary school age, this makes sense. Enjoyment is and should be a primary motivation for youth involvement in sport or any activity. After all, having fun pertains to the nature of being young, and the physical activity of any sport remains valuable to their health and well-being. Hence, the growing “professionalization” of youngsters, characterized by year-long training in only one sport and financial outlays that rival long-term investments, should be decried as misplaced parental vicariousness.

However, there comes a time, particularly when school-age youth mature into college-age adults, that winning does matter. Absent the positive value of competition, sport is reduced to a game, and the larger struggles of life become harder to negotiate. To paraphrase the words of the Marshall University coach, who defended still playing football after nearly the entire team died in a tragic plane crash, it’s not about winning, nor is it about how you play the game; it’s even more important than that.

It’s more important because, at the university level, the struggle to compete, to try to win, to be “swifter, higher, stronger” as the Olympic motto upholds, lies at the root of any and all of life’s adventures. Athletes can learn this through competitive sports. But all growing adults need to cultivate this sense of personal initiative as a way to respond to the opportunities and trials they face, now and in the future. Whether in terms of learning new ideas, forging lasting relationships, or just setting out on one’s own, young people today seem to lack what in the old days was called “moxie” or being “hard-nosed.” They seem, instead, just content to play.

The sources of this seemingly growing indolence remain hard to pinpoint. Perhaps it results from a cultural preference for self-esteem rather than self-acceptance. Perhaps it grows out of a parental support that masks expectations of maturity. Whatever the cause, its effects now resonate beyond sports, as employers have begun to identify the lack of a work ethic as an increasingly serious problem among job applicants.

Of course, striving to win does not nullify fair play and good sportsmanship, nor should losing instigate a coach’s ire or a fan’s backlash. Humility remains a virtue, even in sports. But developing a winning attitude through competition does have its merits.

Having a passion to do and be the best comes from the heart. Caring cannot be coached. How to instill this sense of personal pride is a challenge, and it applies even beyond those on the baseball diamond or soccer pitch or other places of play.

Winning isn’t everything, nor is it the only thing. But it is, and always will be, something important not only in athletics, but in life.