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What It Takes To Be a Champion

When I was a child and someone mentioned the word “champion,” I had visions of standing on the winner’s podium, wearing a medal and glowing with pride as the crowd erupted with applause. Now that I’m an adult, and more importantly, a Toastmaster, I know the word “champion” means so much more.

Champion is a rich and complex word. As a noun, it highlights the leader, the most skilled or adept person in a competition. And, as a verb, to champion means to get behind someone or something, to lift up and empower.

The truest champions embody this word in both ways. Not only do they prove themselves to be exceptionally skilled, they also prove themselves to be deeply humble as they celebrate and empower others.

In 2010 Jamie MacDonald won the District 21 International Speech Contest—he was our district champion. And as the others who won in the International Speech Contest semifinals, Jamie poured his heart and soul into preparing for the World Championship of Public Speaking. He crafted and delivered his speech with passion and enthusiasm, skill and charm, giving everything he had that day on the international stage.

But when the winner was announced, Jamie's name was not called. His heart sank, his eyes fell, his spirits dropped. It could have been a low point ... but in that moment, it became a turning point—a moment of transformation, brought to life by the people seated in the next row.

Quickly and quietly they rose to their feet. Jamie assumed the former World Champions were heading for the stage, eager to congratulate the winner and welcome him into their ranks. But he was wrong. Something far more profound was at hand ... something that spoke volumes about the people within our beloved -- Toastmasters organization.

Much to his surprise, one by one these champion speakers filed out of their row and headed straight for those who had not won that day. With warmth and compassion, they reached out to acknowledge each one, shaking hands and offering words of encouragement. Look how far you came; you have so much to be proud of. What an excellent speech you gave! You are so talented; I hope to see you on this stage again next year.

They wanted each competitor to know that even though they didn't win that day, they could—and should—rise to speak again.

A true champion isn't just a competitor, chasing the spotlight and the glory. Oh, no! The truest champion embodies the spirit of competition, recognizing the outstanding abilities and contributions of every single person who competes. True champions uphold a standard of excellence that permeates all aspects of life and in the end - just want to do their best. Deliver their message.

In Toastmasters, we like to say that there are winners and there are learners. But no matter how a competition concludes, anyone can be a champion, simply by striving to embody the truest definition of the word: to lift others up and help them move forward. To advance a cause that is larger than oneself.

To be a champion is to embody a wholehearted state of excellence—not only to excel and achieve, but to literally become your very best! Ultimately this is larger than the circumstance at hand. It's not just a momentary act of accomplishment; it's a gracious state of being—and that is perhaps - the most impressive achievement.