





WHEN THE TROPHY ISN'T YOURS

Managing Disappointment in Show Choir Competition Season

by Ed Bauer

There is a particular kind of silence that happens at a competition.

It comes right after the announcer reads the final placement your group didn't expect.

It's not loud. It's not dramatic. It's just... heavy.

Students stare at the stage. Directors smile tightly. Parents clap because we always clap. And somewhere in that moment, a teenager who has poured months of rehearsals, sweat, sore feet, missed birthday parties, and vocal rest into a three-minute ballad feels the sting of disappointment.

If you've directed long enough—or parented long enough—you know this feeling well.

And here's the truth: disappointment is part of the experience. The key isn't eliminating it. The key is teaching students how to walk through it.

Because how we handle the hard moments may matter even more than the trophies.



First, Let's Be Honest

Competitions are emotional. We ask students to perform under bright lights, in front of judges with score sheets, against groups who are also incredibly talented and equally committed.

Then we rank them.

That's a lot for adults to process. For teenagers? It can feel world-shaking.

As directors, we feel it too. We know the hours invested. We know how close they were. We replay that one transition in our heads and wonder if we should have adjusted tempo.

And parents? You've watched your child practice in the living room. You've driven the carpools. You've written the checks. You've seen the growth.

So when the results don't match the hope, everyone feels it.

That's not weakness. That's love.

The Car Ride Home Matters More Than the Score Sheet

Parents, this is your moment.

The ride home after a tough competition can shape how your child processes the entire experience.

The instinct might be to fix it:

- "The judges were wrong."
- "You should have won."
- "That other group wasn't even that good."

But here's the tender truth: when we dismiss the results entirely, we also dismiss the opportunity for growth.



Instead, try this:

- “I am so proud of how hard you worked.”
- “You performed beautifully.”
- “What part of today are you most proud of?”

Let them talk. Or let them sit quietly. Sometimes processing doesn't happen immediately.

And resist the urge to dissect the judges' comments before they've had a chance to breathe.

What they need first is reassurance that their worth is not tied to placement.

Directors: Set the Tone Before Awards Ever Happen

The most important conversation about disappointment should happen long before the first competition.

Talk about it in rehearsal.

Normalize it.

Say out loud: “There will be days when we don't get the placement we want. That does not erase the work we've done.”

When we frame competition as a chance to grow instead of a referendum on identity, we give students emotional tools.

One practice I've come to value is defining success internally.

Before walking into competition season, ask your group:

- What does a successful performance look like for us?
- What moments are we most proud of?
- What do we want audiences to feel?

When success is defined only by trophies, students ride an emotional roller coaster that is completely out of their control.

When success includes musical growth, storytelling, teamwork, and character, they have something steady to stand on.

The Awards Ceremony Is a Classroom

I've watched students celebrate with grace. I've also seen tears spill over in the hallway.

Both are human.

The awards ceremony is not just about results. It's about modeling dignity.

Directors, stand tall. Applaud other groups sincerely. Smile at your students.

Parents, follow that lead.

Students are watching how the adults in their lives respond. If we grumble, they internalize bitterness. If we demonstrate respect, they learn sportsmanship.

And sometimes the most powerful lesson is learning to clap wholeheartedly for someone else's success.

That skill will serve them far beyond show choir.

When It Really Hurts

Let's not pretend every disappointment is mild.



Sometimes students feel devastated. Maybe it was their senior year. Maybe they nailed the performance. Maybe they truly believed this was “the one.”

In those moments, avoid platitudes.

Saying “It’s just a competition” can feel dismissive when it has been their entire world for months.

Instead, acknowledge the weight: “I know how much this meant to you.” “I can see how disappointed you are.”

Validation doesn’t make them weaker. It helps them process.

And then, gently, help them zoom out. This was a chapter. Not the whole story.

Remember the Why of Show Choir

In the midst of competition season, it’s easy to forget why we started this journey in the first place

It wasn’t for a plaque.

It was for:

- The friendships formed in rehearsal.
- The shy freshman who found confidence.
- The senior who discovered leadership.
- The harmonies that gave students goosebumps.
- The joy of telling a story through music and movement.

Show choir is about belonging.

It’s about discipline.

It’s about creating something beautiful together.

If we reduce it to rankings, we shrink something extraordinary into something transactional.

We must continually remind ourselves—and our students—of the deeper purpose.

The “why” of show choir is growth. Community. Expression. Character.

Trophies are a bonus.

Post-Competition Debrief: Handle With Care

After a tough result, timing is everything.

Directors: Protect Your Own Heart Too

Here's something we don't say enough: directors feel disappointment deeply.

You invest creatively and emotionally. You carry responsibility. You replay every detail.

Give yourself grace.

Talk with trusted colleagues. Reflect honestly. Then release what you cannot control.

Remember that your impact on students is not measured by the size of your trophy case.

It's measured by:

- The confidence they carry into adulthood.
- The resilience they build.
- The love of music that stays with them.

No judge can score that.

Turning Disappointment into Resilience

Disappointment, when handled well, becomes one of the most powerful teachers.

Students learn:

- How to handle criticism.
- How to persevere.
- How to support teammates.
- How to lose with grace.
- How to try again.

These are life skills.

Long after they forget placements, they will remember how they were taught to respond when things didn't go their way.

If we do our job well, they will leave our programs not just as stronger performers—but as stronger people.

The Bigger Picture

Years from now, they won't remember every ranking.

But they will remember:

- The inside jokes on the bus.
- The standing ovation from a crowd.
- The director who believed in them.
- The parents who showed up every time.

And sometimes, the competitions they didn't win will become the stories they tell with the most perspective.

"I learned more from that loss than any win."

That's growth.

Final Thoughts from the Heart

Competition season will always bring highs and lows.

We will celebrate loudly. We will process quietly.

But if we keep the "why" at the center—if we remember that show choir exists to build character, confidence, and connection—then disappointment becomes part of the journey, not the end of it.

To the directors: keep leading with heart.
To the parents: keep loving without conditions.

To the students: your worth was never in the trophy.

It was always in the music you made together.

And that? That can't be ranked.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Ed Bauer has been in publishing for over twenty years. He was introduced to Show Choir by his daughter and he is forever grateful to her for this wonderful gift.

The bus ride home is not the time for a full technical breakdown.

Give them space.

At the next rehearsal, approach reflection with balance.

Start with strengths:

- What felt solid?
- Where did we grow?
- What moments made you proud?
- Then address improvement as a team:
- What can we refine?
- Where do we have opportunity?

Keep the tone forward-focused, not regret-driven.

The goal is momentum, not guilt.

Parents: Support the Program, Not Just the Placement

It's natural to want your child's group to win.

But the most supportive parents are those who champion the program's culture, not just its trophy count.

- Avoid comparing groups.
- Avoid critiquing other groups.
- Avoid venting frustrations online.

Your words travel faster than you think—and students absorb more than we realize.

Instead, support the long view:

- Encourage perseverance.
- Celebrate growth.
- Thank the directors.
- Model gratitude.

Programs thrive when adults protect the culture.