Karen Collins wants her students to ponder the most basic question in sports: Who wins? Is it the team with the most points? The athlete who crosses the finish line first? Or, is the winner the one who has the most fun? The team that really gels as a unit, and where all the players improve their skills and take part?

The answer isn’t so simple. Collins aims to help her students explore what it means for athletes, coaches, parents, teachers, and society at large.

“I want my students to think outside the box, to look at the whole concept of sport in different ways,” Collins says. “I want to give them the tools to do that. And if I know these students are still thinking about these things after they leave my class, then that’s success.”

Collins has been challenging her students with such questions since she came to UNH in 2002, and her background as a Division I athlete, coach, and researcher puts her in a unique spot to offer real-life examples.

“She’s got this great match between the academics and experience with the subjects she’s teaching that gives her a tremendous amount of credibility,” says Erik Swartz, an associate professor of kinesiology. “Really, it’s the perfect mix for what we’re expected to do as teachers.”

Collins’ students agree, consistently rating her among the best professors. Collins, who has seven siblings, grew up playing sports and was coaching by the time she was in college. Her advanced research now focuses on sports psychology and social issues, and she is often called on to run workshops for the UNH Athletics Department and youth sports organizations. The CoachSmartNH program she developed in 2004 with a colleague has become a model that’s trained more than 750 volunteer coaches statewide to run quality sports programs for kids.

“Winning is how you define it,” Collins tells the students and coaches she mentors. “That’s one of the first conversations you should have with your athletes: How are you going to define success?”

–Jim Graham