

Helping Coaches Build Champion Programs Since 1996 CHAMPIONSHIP PERFORMANCE

Team Building I

Coaches Reflect on Developing Team Captains

When things are working as planned, team captains are the examples of what coaches expect all their athletes to be like.

What does a good captain look like? They are good communicators, bridges between coaching staff and other players, develop positive relationships with teammates, not just the “stars”, but the people on the bench as well. They take responsibility, make good decisions, and handle conflicts among team members. They also understand what it takes to be a good follower as one coach noted, “A good leader also knows when it’s important to follow as well. Not only be out front, but sometimes be the one who is pushing from behind and allowing others to step up.”

This report will address all aspects of developing team captains from a study done on some of the top high school programs in Michigan. Principles and applications described can apply to all levels of coaching.

Characteristics of Most and Least Effective Captains. The top qualities for being a good team captain were leading by example, trusted and respected by teammates, vocal, provide support and not afraid to take proper risk. One coach noted, “I like somebody who is willing to take a risk. Somebody who is willing to stand up

and do the right thing when nobody else wants to. That’s the top of my list. Everyone thinks it’s an easy job, but it’s not.”

Having a good work ethic by having a willingness to develop and improve him or herself though hard work is so important. It’s not always the most talented kids who make the best captains as this coach explained: “It’s great when you have a kid who hasn’t been handed every thing to him in life. He understands the value of hard work. He wants to attend camps and clinics and extra practice to get better. Maybe the most athletic player takes these things for granted. I’ve found the best captains to be the ones who come in as very average athletes and want to make more of themselves. That’s the biggest thing.”

Other characteristics included being likeable and approachable, invested, positive and passionate, and disciplined.

Coaches indicated the least effective captains are selfish, and fail to put the team first. One coach said, “The worst captain is the guy that’s just worried about a college scholarship – it’s all about me. He may want the team to win but if somebody’s too self-absorbed, then they’re not a very effective captain. They care more about their own stats because they want that scholarship. They put their leadership on the periphery as opposed to the team being the center and themselves on the periphery.”

Other least effective captains were not vocal enough and afraid to speak up, make bad decisions and break the rules. One coach noted that ineffective captains are those who make poor

decisions by succumbing to peer pressure: “Someone who is making the bad decisions, they’re kind of leading a gang as opposed to stopping it or putting their foot down. They have to say enough is enough because they can be a force for positive or negative peer pressure.”

Poor captains are also negative, not encouraging or inclusive, have poor work ethic or they simply may not have the right personality fit to be a good captain.

Captain Roles, Expectations, and Duties. Most frequently cited captain duties were logistical matters such as leading warm ups, and organizing activities and events. Other main duties included representing the team in and outside the sport, and being a representative for the coach: “I would say the biggest role they have is being an ambassador because they are representing me and our program.”

Half the coaches reported a captain’s role is to take care of things in his or her absence: “I expect them to be kind of my eyes and ears when I’m not around -whether it’s on the back of the bus, in the locker room, or at someone’s house on the weekends. If something happens, they are the ones who will have to address it or present the situation to me.”

Another coach noted that the captain is responsible for issuing punishment when the coach is not present, but some have abused this job: “We have a culture within our program, if kids curse they have to do sit ups. Captains have been able to dole out ‘punishments’ like this when coaches aren’t

See Team Captains page 7...

Inside This Month's Issue	
* Stay on Task: Re-evaluate Priorities.....	2
* Miami Implements Nutrition Program.....	3
* Winning Ways.....	3
* Six Ways Athletes Can Self-Motivate.....	4
* Two Better Ways to Correct Practice Errors....	4
* Caffeine as a Performance Booster.....	5
* Olympians on Visualization Training.....	6
* Peak Performance Bullets.....	6
* Coaches on Developing Captains.....	7
* Threat versus Challenge and Performance...	8

Stay on Task by Re-evaluating Priorities

Maybe it's your talkative coworker. Maybe it's the project you were handed that never seems to end. Or, maybe it's a family member that's calling you off the hook. There's always something sapping your attention and energy.

Here's the scary thing about that: the people and projects that make the most noise and create the greatest pressure are not necessarily the most important. But they feel urgent, so we often give in just to relieve the pressure. The problem with that behavior is that it ultimately causes more pressure. Doing the less important things, because they are "louder" and demand attention, forfeits your ability to put your best time into the things that really matter.

Championship Performance

10612 - D Providence Road #262
Charlotte, NC 28277

Phone: (704) 321-9198
FAX: (704) 321-0203
info@championshipperform.com
www.championshipperform.com

Championship Performance is published monthly (12 times a year).
Subscription rate is \$99.

The purpose and express goal of **Championship Performance** is to help coaches attain the highest levels of success.

Editor & Publisher: John Sikes Jr.
Administrative Asst.: Kate Lord
Web Development: Wayne Cooper

Regular Contributors:
Brian Cain, M.S.
Rob Gilbert, Ph.D.
Alan Goldberg, Ed.D.
Ken Mannie, Michigan State Univ.

The information contained herein is true to the best of our knowledge. Neither the publisher or individual authors will be held responsible for consequences of implementing the information contained herein pursuant to local, state, and federal statutes.

Philosopher William James said, "The art of being wise is the art of knowing what to overlook." In other words, the real genius is in knowing what not to do!

Are these three time-wasters destroying your productivity? If you are, then it might be time to do a little bit of recon on your priorities.

1. Defaulting to "yes."

Saying yes to everything and everyone dilutes your effectiveness. Sure, you can keep everyone else's boats afloat, but what about everything you need to do to accomplish your own objectives? Remember, the more you say yes, the more you're saying no to other opportunities that could be zip-ping right by you.

Identify only the tasks and projects you can do, and save room in your schedule for those things. If you get a new request, keep in mind you can say, "Let me get back with you." Then, consult your schedule and your list of priorities to determine if the request is on track with your other goals.

2. Acting like a lone wolf.

We all know the antagonistic tune, "Anything you can do, I can do better," which often rings true when working with a team. If you always work in a vacuum, you're preventing your good idea from becoming a great idea. You're also keeping people out of a process who might know things you need to know, or are better at executing a particular skill than you are. Delegating and collaborating are key to protecting your time and making the most of your plans. Don't hesitate to bring in trusted voices and efficient teammates to achieve your priorities and protect your time.

3. Too many distractions from Cell Phones, Co-workers and Computer Rabbit Trails.

We all need a little break from the grind, but how much time are you spending on things you enjoy, things that are "fun" instead of ensuring your productivity.

The major culprits for you might be social media, apps on your phone, or chatting with co-workers.

Re-evaluate how various projects and tasks contribute to your priorities. Limit distractions without destroying your morale.

Recommendation: *So, how can you cure yourself of wasting time and getting off track?*

A great way to accomplish this is to practice something first coined by the Italian economist Vilfredo Pareto, called the "Pareto Principle."

The idea is this: by focusing your attention on the top 20% of all your priorities, you get an 80% return on your effort. You can't do everything, but if you do the most important things first, you will gain your greatest results. It's amazing how many of the less important things don't need to be done.

People often ask, "How is this possible when the people around me require so many things of me?"

You will gain momentum from being consistently successful in the big things that really matter. This will gain you more and more latitude in the things that are less important.

Excerpted from the John Maxwell leadership blog.
www.johnmaxwell.com

Miami Implements Nutrition Program

University of Miami Nutritionist Kyle Bellamy has the goal of trying to create lifestyle eating changes.

“Those changes can last a lifetime, and at some point football is going to end, and if you can have a good, healthy lifestyle, it is going to make the biggest difference if these player’s lives,” he said.

Bellamy, a former Hurricanes baseball player, was hired to work full time with the football team this year. The decision to add a nutritionist was a move suggested by first-year coach Mark Richt, who has long preached nutrition and health throughout his career. Results have already begun to show, with players buying into living healthier lifestyles, some more easily than others.

“I will take them shopping and tell them to set a budget, and we will plan their meals and snacks to fit their budget for the week,” Bellamy said. “You can eat healthy on a small budget, it just takes a little bit more planning. It takes education to know what to buy.”

It was Richt’s idea to *hand over a portion of the players’ stipend to Bellamy*. In the past, players were on their own when buying food. Problems arose, especially during the summers, when they spent so much time off campus. Now, Bellamy helps them purchase healthy meals and snacks.

The biggest challenge is finding food that is also tasty. The baseball player in Bellamy causes him to call it a “home run” when he can combine the two. Included in the grocery-store rotations are trips to Grown, an organic fast-food restaurant.

“In the past, players really weren’t responsible to eat the right things,” Richt said. “They’ll eat a lot, but do they really eat the right things to fuel their body? Now, that they have

the education from our nutritionist and the fact that we have the meals we’re providing for them, they can’t hardly help but make the gains that we need.”

The Hurricanes have seen improvement across the board, especially on the offensive and defensive lines. Several of them have already experienced a decrease in body fat.

“It’s been really good,” said defensive end Scott Patchan, who had dropped his body fat to 9 percent. “We’ve all seen improvements, whether it’s guys able to gain weight or guys need to lose weight or guys just looking to lose fat and look better.”

The nutrition program has made things easier for incoming strength coach Gus Felder. He said it was the first thing he noticed was missing when he arrived in January. He said **an unhealthy diet negates anything he is trying to accomplish.**

“You have to eat right. For the best long-term recovery and injury prevention, you’ve got to have great nutrition,” Felder said.

One of the biggest changes made by Felder is having players lift by position. The quarterbacks all work together on similar programs. Each position coach is also present for workouts.

“We all have a set time to go in there,” quarterback Brad Kaaya said. “All the quarterbacks are lifting with me. I’m not doing the same lift as our tight ends are. Everyone has specified lifts based on position demands. It’s been great.”

P.S. More on specific sports nutrition recommendation in current and past issues of Championship Performance.

Winning Ways

■ Auburn Success Creed

In leadership studies, having core principles to fall back on provides a strong foundation. The University of Auburn has a school creed that athletes are asked to memorize. You can model your own to fit your team and your individual sport. Here is the Auburn creed:

I believe that this is a practical world and that I can count only on what I earn. Therefore, I believe in work, hard work.

I believe in education, which gives me the knowledge to work wisely and trains my mind and my hands to work skillfully.

I believe in honesty and truthfulness, without which I cannot win the respect and confidence of my fellow men.

I believe in a sound mind, in a sound body and a spirit that is not afraid, and in clean sports that develop these qualities.

I believe in obedience to law because it protects the rights of all.

I believe in the human touch, which cultivates sympathy with my fellow men and mutual helpfulness and brings happiness for all.

I believe in my country, because it is a land of freedom and because it is my own home, and that I can best serve that country by doing justly, loving mercy, and walking humbly with my God.

And because Auburn men and women believe in these things,

I believe in Auburn and love it.

Six Ways Athletes Can Motivate Themselves

Note: The following report is addressed directly to athletes.

Work ethic is considered to be a cornerstone to any performance outcome. But some athletes have the misconception that if they work hard today that they will perform better tomorrow.

Instead of buying into the fact that progress takes time and persistence, these athletes want immediate gratification. The reality is that while hard work is the foundation for optimal performance, it rarely leads to immediate success.

Think of the farmer. He doesn't throw down some seeds one day and expect to see crops the next day. He tends to the seedlings each day.

Even though he doesn't see the results immediately, he knows growth is occurring just below the surface. If he

gives up on feeding and watering the seedlings, the results will be devastating.

He has faith in the process and knows results will happen if he stays the course. Athletic improvement requires the same: work, persistence and belief in the process.

Performance is the result of habits and habits develop through consistent repetition over a significant period of time.

Recommendation: *What can you do to maintain motivation when results have yet to be seen?*

1. **Give yourself a break** - It's normal to get angry when you are not seeing results but let that emotion fuel your efforts to push forward.

2. **Be patient** - Let go of that need to see immediate results. Everything worthwhile takes time. Know that

your efforts will pay off at some point.

3. **Have a "why"** - Remind yourself why you are competing this in the first place. Understanding and using the reasons "why" you compete will help you stay motivated.

4. **Enjoy the ride** - Enjoy the process. There are more to goals than just the end result. It's not about getting to the top, but rather the climb to the top.

5. **Give yourself credit** - Take pride in how far you have come in your sport and not how far you need to go.

6. **Celebrate milestones** - Remind yourself that each step moves you closer to your goal no matter how small it is.

Patrick Cohn, Ph.D.
www.peaksports.com

Two Better Ways to Correct Practice Errors

Correcting errors is one of the most frequent and important tasks which a coach performs. It is common for an athlete to ask the coach, "Coach, tell me what I'm doing wrong." Very often the coach obliges by going through a list of wrongs.

Coaches need to realize that in the vast majority of cases athletes really don't need or want to know what they are doing wrong. The athletes are simply asking for help. What they want and need to know at the moment is specific information on how to make the movement correctly or at least improve.

Recommendation: 1. **Answering the question and immediately focusing on what was wrong falls in the**

same category as asking a player not to do something. For example, if a basketball coach tells a center, "How many times do I have to tell you not to put the ball on the floor before you go to the basket?," he must realize the futility of this approach.

It is much more effective both from an instructional and learning standpoint to focus on the specific things the player needs to do to improve.

Basketball coaching legend John Wooden understood this principle. He often began his instruction following a performance error by modeling the movement done correctly.

2. **Keep the number of corrections to a minimum.** Most sports skills

require coordination of several body parts, thus it is possible that several mistakes may occur in a movement such as a baseball swing, tennis serve, etc. Even a highly skilled athlete can suffer information overload and not be able to handle all the suggestions regarding changes in movement.

In general, the further into the movement the player gets the more potential for information overload. This in itself can lead to errors. A second rule to follow is to deal with the first error which occurred in the movement.

Quite often correcting this error leads to significant reduction of subsequent mistakes.

Athletes Use Caffeine to Boost Performance

U.S. swimmer Elizabeth Beisel did something a little crazy at the 2012 Summer Olympics in London. Before the biggest races of her life, she tried a performance-enhancing substance: coffee. The results were electric. She swam two personal-best times and won a silver medal.

At first, coffee's impact was "100% physical. I could truly feel the effects on me," recalls Beisel, who will compete in the Olympics this summer. "Now, it may be more mental than it is physical. It's just become part of my routine."

Caffeine aids athletic performance, research shows, yet it is completely legal. One note for athletes considering coffee or caffeinated drinks before performance. They will get the biggest boost if they don't drink caffeine every day. Once the body gets used to a substance, the performance benefit is minimal. If they wait, say a few days to a week, between caffeine uses, the bump can be more substantial.

Caffeine is most effective in short-burst need for speed. Recent research suggests that even small doses of caffeine, equivalent to what's in a "tall" Starbucks, can improve athletic performance (about 3 milligrams).

"I'd say at the elite level, the majority of athletes use caffeine," says Steve Magness, cross-country coach at the University of Houston and author of "The Science of Running." Many dietary supplements are unproven, Mr. Magness says, but caffeine "just consistently, repeatedly works."

Research shows caffeine can confer a 1% to 2% benefit, he says. That's significant for competitive margins measured in seconds or fractions of a second.

About a third of the more than 80 sports drinks and snacks from Gu Energy Labs, of Berkeley, Calif., have caffeine. TrueStart Coffee sells premium freeze-dried coffee with a standardized caffeine level for use by athletes.

Triathletes, cyclists and rowers showed the highest levels of caffeine use, and gymnasts the lowest. (*Perhaps coffee jitters and the balance beam don't mix. For any sport where an athlete experiences pre-game jitters, caffeine is most likely not recommended.*)

Research scientist Dr. Del Coso conducted about a dozen studies on caffeine's effects in stop-and-start sports such as tennis and basketball. He put athletes through sports-related tests, such as squatting and jumping for volleyball players, and measured their performance. Athletes who drank caffeine jumped a little higher and ran a little faster than athletes who drank a similar but decaffeinated beverage.

In simulated soccer games, as recorded on GPS trackers, players who drank a caffeinated beverage sprinted more often and ran further overall during a match.

Some athletes don't respond to caffeine, and it affects some more than others, researchers have found. The

potential downsides of moderate caffeine use include gastrointestinal distress, sleep problems, anxiety and nervousness.

"I would argue that caffeine is at the low end of everything that can have side effects," says Lawrence Spriet, co-author of the 2013 book "Caffeine for Sports Performance."

Caffeine doses higher than 6 milligrams increase the chances of side effects while providing minimal performance improvements, Dr. Del Coso says.

Gary Hall Jr., the 10-time U.S. Olympic medalist, recalls having several espressos each day during his swimming career starting in the mid-1990s, even on days he didn't swim. He says he avoided coffee before evening races to prevent sleep problems and nerves.

"Oftentimes for a big competition, you don't need that, and actually you want to reel that in," he says.

Beisel drinks a cup before every race. Ahead of the Olympics, she says she's trying to cut back, "just so when I do race, it's like that feeling when you have your first sip of coffee."

Excerpted from a report by Rachel Bachman in the Wall St. Journal www.wsj.com

“

The brick walls are there for a reason. The brick walls are not there to keep us out. The brick walls are there to give us a chance to show how badly we want something. Because the brick walls are there to stop the people who don't want it badly enough. They're there to stop the other people.

”

Randy Pausch, Author

Olympians on Visualization Training

Harvard University researchers made an amazing discovery about mental imagery. They asked a group of students to imagine tensing and relaxing their right index finger without actually moving the finger. They were asked to do this five minutes daily for a month. At the end of the period, strength in the finger increased by 20 percent.

Nothing changed in the finger muscles themselves. Instead, a connection between nerves and the muscles they control got stronger.

The 2016 Olympics are just around the corner. The following article takes a look at the visualization training methods of three past Olympic athletes.

According to US Olympic Committee sport psychologist Peter Haberi: “Imagery training is a powerful, mental work-out for athletes. We want them to experience in their minds, their ideal performance.”

Haberi says the imagery training is especially impactful on athletic events that require a series of precise movements.

According to champion wrestler Lincoln McClavy, over-thinking your moves in the heat of competition can tie your brain in knots and kill your performance. He relies on mental footage in his brain to make his moves automatic.

“From the second the whistle blows, it’s all instinct,” noted McClavy. If you stopped the match during the middle of it and asked me my name, I would have to think for a few seconds before answering. I never think, ‘this might work or that might work’. There are times that I’ve thought, ‘an arm drag could work right now.’ But if it’s not automatic, then it’s probably too late.”

Mental practice can be so real, it can be exhausting. An Olympic diver reported taking long walks so she could mentally rehearse each dive in her mind.

“I picture the perfect dive,” Davison said. “I actually feel tired afterward from all the visualization.”

Her statement undoubtedly reflects the concentration level required from serious mental practice. **Imagery requires attention to detail and intense concentration for the brain to send activation messages to the body.**

One of the benefits of mental workouts is the benefit to tune out crowd noise. The brain is better able to focus energy on physical movements than it would have otherwise.

Olympic weight-lifter Tara Nott described this phenomenon: “When I step up to the weight, I walk behind the bar and just stand there with my eyes closed for a few moments. I take a deep breath. I don’t see anything in front of me. I don’t see the judge or people in the stands. I hear ‘Cmon Tara’ in the back-ground, but it’s mostly a blur.

The ultimate goal for athletes is that the less “outside distractions” they have to attend to or think about, the more automatic their physical movements can be. The more one mentally practices a series of physical movements, the lower the brain activity required to execute them.

■ Peak Performance Bullet

■ How Coaches Train and Prepare Captains

Coaches emphasized having good communication with their captains specifically regarding expectations, concerns and the opportunity for them, in turn, to express their issues to the coaches. One coach said he emphasized that being a team captain is more than just a title and the job of going out for the opening coin toss. They would pump them up by saying how important their leadership was.

Other coaches reported regular feedback to their captains regarding their leadership actions and behaviors. This strengthened the relationship between coach and captain: “Each season, I make sure to talk to one captain at each practice and tell him at least three times how much I appreciate what he is doing and thank them. This works really well and is a critical piece because the more they believe that they are trusted by us as coaches, the better job they will do.”

Other coaches reported holding regular coach/captain meetings, and one coach had her team go through Jeff Janssen’s book on Team Captains before the season started. Providing their athletes with concrete examples of what good and poor leadership looks like was also noted. Some coaches used an interactive leadership training experience to prepare their captains.

However one coach said the role of team captain was mostly on the job training: “We can tell them what a captain should and shouldn’t be like, but this deal is mostly doing the job and seeing for themselves what works and what doesn’t. I just sort of try to guide them through the process.”

Excerpted from the Sport Psychologist, March 2013. Authors: Daniel Gould, Dana Voecker, Katherine Griffes. Published by Human Kinetics. www.humankinetics.com

Team Captain Development, cont.

around. Some kids enjoy that power a little too much and overstep their bounds. Sometimes we have to pull them aside and say ‘back off somewhat.’”

Other captain duties listed by coaches included monitoring teammates and enforcing consequences for rules, providing encouragement and support, assisting younger players transition, focus on team needs, have integrity and character, be flexible in their approach with teammates, hold team meetings when needed.

Biggest Challenges Faced by Captains.

Coaches most often mentioned balancing multiple demands as being a big challenge for captains. Many said that playing the role of friend and leader is very difficult. One coach noted, “This aspect of leadership doesn’t come naturally for most kids. It can put them in awkward situations because they may not want to be popular with everyone, but they do want to be accepted and understood by peers. Being a captain can put them out on an island and separate them with teammates.”

Another challenge is coping with various forms of pressure. They had to live up to behavior standards for themselves and be accountable. Being a role model for a whole year can prove difficult as this coach noted: “Being a role model at all times. Not just during the 2 or 3 hour practice...off the field and in the community is tough. We reward players with captainship honor in December and they have the job through November. Staying out of trouble and monitoring others can be taxing.”

Another coach noted that being accountable for performance was a challenge: “Captains have a burden in that their performance has to be good and they are also responsible for the team’s performance. That causes some players to put too much pressure on themselves.”

Pressure from parents can be problematic: “Most parents love it when their kid is a captain. It’s almost like they were named a captain as well. Some parents aren’t always aligned with what we are doing as a team. Their son or daughter can struggle with the mixed messages coming from the parent and the coaches as we try to develop their leadership skills. If their model won’t make them successful, that’s obvi-

ously a problem. So we sometimes have to deal with parents acting in a way that is adverse to team rules and culture. When a captain doesn’t have a more prominent on field role, parents will complain and the player gets confused at who to listen to. We have to help them walk through that.”

Biggest captain mistakes. Half the coaches mentioned captains making the mistake of being too power hungry or selfish. One coach was upset that some of his captains had used their senior captain role to benefit themselves instead of investing in the team: “Some of the older athletes, it’s so important for them to think of the team and our team’s community. Even though they may be graduating, it’s so important for them to help develop the younger athletes, to encourage them so they can take a leadership role in the future. We stress for them to see the big picture and their role within the bigger picture of the overall team culture, not just their last season.”

Being too negative, hurtful of others feelings, poor communication and interaction with others and taking their captainship for granted were other common mistakes.

Experiences and Strategies that Help Captains Learn Leadership.

Prior sport experiences were critical in developing leadership. The more sports life lessons and the longer the kid has played the better. Extracurricular activities such as community service and speaking in front of groups are helpful. Being on the student council or standing up for someone who is disadvantaged were great prerequisites to being a good leader. Interacting with a larger family was also noted.

Other pre-leader qualities and experiences included learning from past captains, formal education including leaders classes, conferences and speakers and reading materials. Trial and error was another factor listed. Discussion groups and feedback also helped athletes becoming better leaders.

One coach noted that he got his captains more involved with coaching decisions: “You’ve got to involve your captains to make them get invested. When they participate in the decision-making on some issues, it gives them a sense that they really do have a stake in the team. They

can work more closely with the coaches. They can see what we do and how we prepare. They get involved in the coaching process, which helps them be better coaches on the field. This is the best way to enhance leader skills – engage them. Involve them and give them a stake. When people are more invested, they are way more motivated. It’s like the old corporate theory of giving workers some input on the company’s mission. I like to take that same approach.”

Biggest Mistakes Made By Coaches.

Giving captains an excess of responsibilities and having the rest of the team rely too much on the captains. “We can overload kids sometimes. Sometimes we give them too much coaching responsibility. There is a fine line of what you want your captains to do and not do.”

Sometimes the opposite occurs: not utilizing them enough: “One year, we had a bunch of captains who were glorified seniors and not really used much. Sometimes we name captains, then kind of forget about getting them clear on roles and duties.”

Poor selection was listed as a problem, including choosing the wrong person or waiting until the season begins to select one: “We need to do a better job of identifying captains. Sometimes we make the easy choice which will please most of the team. We need to spend more time with the kids away from the field and then you can find out that maybe one kid doesn’t even want to be named a captain. Some aren’t mature enough to handle the responsibility. We can rush the selection process. It pays to invest some time in this important decision.”

Other mistakes included not communicating enough with captains, failing to reinforce and educate them, and making assumptions that kids knew more about the leader role than they thought.

Excerpted from the Sport Psychologist, March 2013. Authors: Daniel Gould, Dana Voecker, Katherine Griffes. Published by Human Kinetics. www.humankinetics.com

Mind Set Determines Threat Versus Challenge

Note: The following is addressed directly to athletes.

A simple distinction appears to lie at the heart of whether athletes are able to rise to the occasion and perform their best when it really counts or crumble under the weight of expectations and tough conditions on the day of a competition: *Do they view the competition as a threat or a challenge?*

What happens when you are threatened by something (think grizzly bear). First, what direction do you want to go? Of course, you want to run away from the threat as fast as you can. Physiologically, your muscles tighten up, you hold your breath, your balance goes back, and your center of gravity rises. Psychologically, your motivation is to flee from the threat. Your confidence plummets because you don't feel capable of confronting the situation (that's one reason it's a threat to you). You are focused only on protecting yourself from the threat. And, naturally, you feel fear, helplessness, and despair (because the grizzly bear will kill you!). In sum, everything both physically and mentally goes against you, making it virtually impossible for you to overcome the threat.

Where does threat come from? Most powerfully, from a fear of failure. That is the grizzly bear that you see lying in the path toward your athletic goals. The threat is what will happen if you fail. Obviously you won't die physically. But at a deep level, you feel as if some part of you will die, usually your self-esteem. The threat arises when you believe that there will be serious consequences for not achieving your goals, for example, you will embarrass yourself, let down

your family and friends, feel that your sport has been a waste of time, or be devastated because you didn't fulfill your sport dreams. The irony is that by responding with a threat reaction because of these worries, you actually cause the very thing that is most threatening to you, namely, failure.

A challenge reaction produces an entirely different set of responses. When challenged by something, you want to go at it, you want to conquer it. Physiologically, you feel fired up, but also relaxed, with just the right amount of adrenaline to make you feel strong, quick, and fast. Your muscles are loose, you take steady breaths, your balance is on the balls of your feet, and your center of gravity lowers. Psychologically, your singular motivation is to go at that thing that is challenging you and overcome it. You are confident that you have the capabilities to surmount the challenging situation. Your focus is like a laser beam on the challenge in front of you. As for emotions, you feel excitement, inspiration, pride, and courage. In sum, your entire physical and psychological being is directed toward triumphing over the challenge and your chances of finding success are high.

Where then does challenge come from? It starts with a focus on achieving success rather than avoiding failure. With challenge, there is no fear of failure, but rather a profound desire to pursue your sport goals with complete vigor and without hesitation. Challenge is associated with your enjoying the process of your sport regardless of whether you succeed or fail. The emphasis is on having fun and seeing competitions as exciting and enriching. Your sport, when seen as a challenge, is an experience that is relished

and sought out at every opportunity. Thus, challenge is highly motivating, to the point where you love being in pressure situations. When you develop a challenge reaction, you put yourself in your best possible position to perform your best and succeed because everything that impacts your performing is on your side.

The strange thing about threat vs. challenge is that it's all in your mind; it's rarely about the reality of a situation, but rather in how you perceive it.

Look at it like this. Two athletes, Athlete A and Athlete B, are of equal ability and equally well prepared for an upcoming competition. Upon arrival at event, they encounter really bad weather conditions. Athlete A sees the conditions and thinks "This is awful. I hate these conditions. How am I going to perform well today?"

In contrast, Athlete B thinks, "These are tough conditions, but I've been training under these conditions and everyone has them anyway. I'm going to crush it!" Clearly, Athlete A sees the race as a threat, while Athlete B sees it as a challenge. Who do you think will have a better race?

So, next time you're faced with a really tough competitive situation, whether bad weather, a hostile crowd, a really tough field of competitors, or the biggest competition of your life, ask yourself whether you see it as a threat or a challenge. Then, embrace the challenge and tell yourself, "Bring it on!"

Jim Taylor, Ph.D.
www.drjimtaylor.com

Please email comments, questions, story ideas or address changes to info@championshipperform.com. We want and value your feedback!