



A PANE IN THE GLASS

CONFIDENCE & EXPECTATIONS ARE NOT SYNONYMS

We hear it constantly in sports axioms: "Winning isn't everything, it's the only thing!" (I don't believe the late great coach of the Green Bay Packers, Vince Lombardi, ever said that by the way), "It's GOLD or nothing!", "You don't win the silver medal, you lose the gold!", "We expect nothing but victory!" ... and the list goes on and on! As a coach, I love to hear the opposition reiterate any one of these! It indicates a critical loss of focus.

This particular essay comes at "playdown" time for most teams. Much of the preparation is done! You and your team are now in maintenance mode. Little that you do now will improve performance. Now it's a matter of ensuring that it occurs. And, unfortunately, this is also the time when the classic error is made by well-intentioned, hard-working, talented teams. They focus on their long awaited, eagerly anticipated and richly deserved victory (at least richly deserved by their standards). Most of the team's stakeholders endorse and perpetuate the myth. What's a team to do in the face of all of that?

The problem is the difference between two words that on the surface "appear" to be synonymous, "confidence" & "expectations". They are related but do not mean the same thing and to confuse the two can be a disaster.

Let's deal with confidence first. No athlete performs well without it but its source from athlete to athlete can be diverse. Its root is **trust** in one's skills. For some, that trust comes from a recent performance, for others from a respected teammate or coach. Still another might get it from an inspiring story or pre-game musical selection. Who knows from whence it comes? The result is a focus on the process, not the outcome. Remember something about skills. *You can't leave them at home.* A sub par performance is not technically based. It may very likely be the result but it's definitely not the cause. The cause might come from a variety of sources, many of which I will deal with in this series. But if my experience with high performance athletes means anything, it has demonstrated that a solid

technical performance means the athlete trusts his/her skills. A sound technical delivery is the athlete’s most important possession but its retention is the challenge.

Gerry Peckham, that well-known director of things high performance for the Canadian Curling Association once asked me the classic confidence question. It went something like this. “Bill, are you confident because you’re playing well, or are you playing well because you’re confident?” My answer was, “For me, it’s neither. I’m confident when I know I’ve done pretty much everything in my power to prepare.” What would your answer have been to Gerry’s question? There are no incorrect answers. It’s only incorrect when you can’t provide one!

On the other side of the coin is expectation! When you expect a certain result, even though the preparation has been most dedicated and process oriented, you set yourself and your team up for failure! You can’t control an outcome! To expect one means you have lost your way and a roll of the dice is all you have left at your disposal. Heh, sometimes you may be lucky and the dice will roll your way but likely those times will be few and far between.

We’ve all seen this scenario before. A significantly more experienced and skilled team comes up against a team with their experience and skill on the negative side of the ledger. Many times the result is a win for the less experienced and skilled team. What happened? It could have been many things but I’ll wager that the primary cause was the difference in “expectations”. The less skilled team certainly doesn’t “expect to win”, all they can rightfully expect is a good performance. They are not as skilled but they have the ability to trust the skills they do possess. The more experienced and greater skilled team runs the risk of losing focus on their performance and instead focuses on the outcome. “Let’s just win this and move on”, is a common sentiment expressed among teams like this. An attitude of disdain or lack of respect for the opposition is another critical error these teams commonly make. The result many times is a vastly inferior performance on their part, an “L” in the w/l column beside their name, a deteriorated level of trust and an elevated level of anxiety the rest of the way in the event. The next time you see two teams in these relative situations play one another, watch the body language of the teams. As the less experienced and skilled team remains close on the scoreboard in the later stages of the contest, the body language of the more experienced and skilled team begins to display the symptoms outlined above.

The challenge for the coach of the more experienced and skilled team is to ensure that the team focuses on their performance. The “L’s” and “W’s” will take care of themselves. I’ll deal with this issue in greater detail in the next essay in this series on “Goal Setting”.

You perhaps noted in the above paragraph that one of the results of focusing on the outcome and not the process is an inferior performance. This is where an inexperienced coach can fall into the “technical trap”. Certainly, as the team begins to play poorly, you will notice, with that critically trained technical eye, some technical issues. You will make note of them and perhaps even in the context of the game, make very understandable suggestions for remediation. Wrong! You’re dealing with the symptoms and not the disease. What you as the coach need to address is the focus the team has. Correct that and the technical issues, in large part, will take care of themselves.

Here’s a take home strategy for you. Before each game, insist that each player identify and announce to his/her teammates, one “performance goal” for the upcoming game. As you’ll see in the next essay, a “performance goal” is usually very specific or short term and one over which the athlete has “total control”. A front-end player might have, as a “performance goal”, to time each draw the opposition delivers. At the end of the game the first discussion item is a report by each player of his/her “short term performance goal”. You will be amazed how often the attainment of those goals leads to a good, very good, excellent or exceptional performance with the win taking care of itself!

Permit me a small editorial comment at this point. Much has been made of the “expected” Canadian medal count in the upcoming Winter Olympic Games in Vancouver. The number I’m hearing is 35. Yikes, what a mistake to focus on that! Fortunately, the athletes who will be charged with that responsibility will be smart enough to disregard that largely media and stakeholder centered expectation and focus on the details necessary for a best performance and let the medal count take care of itself! And in most cases, it will be a qualified coach who will keep those athletes focused on the process and not the outcome.

Enjoy working with your athletes!

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