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PRESENTS THE COACHING SERIES...

“A PANE IN THE GLASS”

So You Want to be Perfect?

(based upon the research of John Dunn in an interview with David Howell of the Edmonton Journal)

It's a noble aspiration! Not many wish to be less than the best they can be but perfect, is that really what we want? Most would say it is but tread carefully you perfectionists. John Dunn of the University of Alberta has taken a very close look at perfectionism. Here is what he has unearthed.

For athletes, striving for perfection is almost natural. But is it a healthy pursuit or is it fraught with hidden pitfalls that create stress and anxiety? John's research has shown that either can occur.

His study of 174 of the best teenage football players in Canada revealed two distinct types of perfectionism: adaptive, which is healthy and maladaptive, which is definitely not. We all know perfectionist of each type!

In John's own words, "I think most high performance athletes strive for perfection. I would call that a healthy striving. Let's face it, the ultimate goal in performance is to go out there and be flawless. But how an athlete thinks about the pursuit of perfection can create big problems."

Adaptive perfectionists establish moderately high personal standards but feel low pressure from themselves, their peers and most notably, their coaches. Achieving their goals is accompanied by feelings of elation and it shows.

Maladaptive perfectionists on the other hand are characterized by a feeling of extreme pressure to perform. They can't enjoy their victories to the fullest extent because they're consumed by the tiny flaws along the way. They beat themselves up over the smallest imperfection. They fail to realize that even the best athletes make mistakes along the way. Tiger Woods, Wayne Gretzky and Michael Jordan are among athletes at the top of their sports but still make mistakes. To hear John explain it, "...those are types of athletes who, even when they make mistakes, don't get hung up on them. They just keep coming back for more. The maladaptive perfectionist almost becomes afraid of making mistakes because they're motivated by the fear of failure, as opposed to being motivated by the opportunity for success." Over time, maladaptive perfectionists can suffer from anxiety, stress and self doubt. This can be so acute that they simply walk away from their sport. "My guess is that a lot of those athletes will burn out, because they waste so much emotional energy in the pursuit of perfection that they essentially empty the tank

before other people. They don't last at the top for a long time" explains John. He offers this advice for coaches, parents and athletes of all ages.

SET REALISTIC GOALS "I'm a big believer in challenging our athletes, and I don't care whether it's a five-year-old or an NHL hockey player. Give them standards that they're going to have to work hard to achieve, but make sure they are achievable. If you set unrealistically high standards, then you're setting people up for failure."

REWARD EFFORT "When athletes are giving their all, reward that, reinforce that and tell them they're doing a good job. The very worst thing, which I hate and I see, unfortunately, in many performance environments is coaches and parents who only reward winning. So much is out of your control when it comes to winning and winning is not necessarily the best indicator of performance. It's the process that we should be focusing on – in other words, how do we get victory?"

CELEBRATE SUCCESS "Even a small improvement is worth celebrating. Don't hold back. If you keep saying 'Good Job,' they keep feeling good about themselves. They start to internalize, say, 'Hey, this is great, I'm getting better.' They continually get this positive reinforcement – there's no fear, there's no anxiety, and they feel good about themselves."

MISTAKES HAPPEN "In trying to avoid this notion of maladaptive perfectionism, let people know it's OK to make mistakes. If we view mistakes as both acceptable and an integral part of the learning process, then athletes will not fear making mistakes, they'll be more likely to take more risks, more likely to challenge themselves."

HAVING FUN YET? "Am I improving? Am I trying my hardest and, most of all, am I having fun? When you're having fun you're not stressed, you're not anxious. You're not worried about living up to other people's expectations. Help athletes help themselves to have fun."

Addendum:

In curling, especially with juniors, striving for the "perfect curling delivery" is something I see regularly and primarily due to Dr. Dunn's work, it scares the life out of me when I see it! Besides recounting the premise of Dr. Dunn's research I add the following:

1. You don't need "a perfect curling delivery", only one that is serviceable. You need a curling delivery that is easy on your body type and is biomechanically sound enough to "allow" you to make all the curling shots you're called upon to make. Look around at the national championships or the Grand Slam events. Do you see everyone delivering the stones using exactly the same delivery? That's got to tell you something. (Perhaps a re-read of "A Pane in the Glass #20" might be a good idea at this point ["Straight, Simple, Silent"].)
2. I couldn't recognize a perfect delivery anyway and I doubt that any of my colleagues can either so how would you know when you've achieved it?
3. Striving for a perfect curling delivery is expensive, not in dollars and cents but in time and effort. The time you spend might be at the expense of team dynamics, mental preparation, strategy &

tactics, physical preparation or proper nutrition. I think that's much too high a price to pay! Don't get this confused with the necessary time and energy each athlete spends making sure their curling delivery remains sound so that he/she can trust it and be confident in it. Certainly everyone needs to do that but even that will change from athlete to athlete. Some will need to deliver training rocks daily while others, not so frequently.

Allow me to illustrate with a story. When Derek Jeter, shortstop of the New York Yankees broke into the major leagues, he committed a high number of errors in his rookie year. After that, and to this day, he has established himself as the premier athlete at that defensive position with many Gold Glove Awards presented to him. When he was asked about this short term, dramatic turnaround on CBS's "Sixty Minutes" in an interview with the late Ed Bradley, he explained it this way. "I stopped being afraid to fail!" His skill set from year-to-year certainly improved to be sure but that alone could not have made the difference but a change in his attitude did. Rather than being distraught with an error, he decided to learn from it. He saw failure as a learning experience! Encourage your athletes to do the same!

From a coaching perspective, pay particular attention to body language (individual or collective) following a missed shot or some other adverse result. Do you see dejection, surrender or some other negative reaction or is it a resolve to deal with the situation and move on? The reaction to adversity is a key measure of a team that is either stagnant, moving in the wrong direction or is on its way to performing to the best of its ability. Elite athletes don't let adversity show!

I have a recommendation for you. Read "[Golf is Not a Game of Perfect](#)" by Dr. Bob Rotella.

Enjoy working with your athletes and I'll see you soon behind a pane in the glass!

- Bill Tschirhart