
THE PERFECT PERFORMANCE VERSUS TRYING TO BE PERFECT

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An article, by reknown sport psychologist, from the United States Olympic Committee Olympian Magazine. This piece focuses on the positive and negative factors associated with perfectionism. In addition, it can help coaches help athletes who have negative self-talk tendancies.

THE PERFECT PERFORMANCE VERSUS TRYING TO BE PERFECT, By Sean McCann, USOC Sport Psychologist, Olympian Magazine, Spring 2006

Every athlete and coach dreams of performing flawlessly at the biggest competition of their lives. It's a pleasant fantasy, but athletes who try to be perfect at major competitions often face the unpleasant reality of terrible performances. Ironically, trying to be perfect is often the worst thing an athlete can think about while performing. Why? The answer is complicated and involves personality issues such as perfectionism combined with the all too often unpredictable circumstances surrounding competition.

Researchers studying perfectionism have found that it is a label for many factors, but Dr. Randy Frost and colleagues have identified two key dimensions of perfectionist thinking: personal standards and concern over mistakes. (1) In a general sense, these two dimensions represent the good and the bad aspects of perfectionist thinking by athletes. Personal standards are related to driving towards perfection, while concern over mistakes is related to worry about messing up in competition.

These two dimensions are similar to what coaches frequently tell us about the best athletes being driven to get better and accepting nothing less than excellence. A perfectionist athlete who cannot accept problems or mistakes, however, may worry themselves out of a competition. Personal standards are strength, but can become a weakness if too fanatically pursued. While researchers have not yet studied the effects of perfectionism on training, it is likely that these and other dimensions of perfectionism are related to the tendency of some athletes to overtrain.

A coach can get a sense of whether athletes have self-destructive perfectionist thoughts by asking about their internal language or "self-talk" during training and competition. Based on research in this area, coaches should take note when athletes seem too concerned with mistakes. The key issue is whether athletes become so focused on avoiding mistakes that they avoid taking the necessary risks associated with high-levels of success.

Behavioral clues to this type of thinking might include:

- > Athletes avoiding pressure situations (such as an athlete who passes up the opportunity to take the last shot).
- > Athletes who appear to give up after an early mistake.
- > Athletes who frequently raise potential problems with a coach's training program.
- > Athletes who use too much energy devising a back-up to a back-up plan.
- > Athletes who report having recurring images of sports failure.

In sports, outcome does matter, and mistakes can be costly. At many competitions, athletes feel like a perfect performance is needed to win. Given these realities, how can you convince a perfectionist that his/her concern with mistakes is unproductive? Rather than trying to change an athlete's personality, a coach can re-focus a perfectionist's energy in a more functional way. One technique is changing an athlete's definition of a mistake. For example, the athlete who consistently avoids taking the last shot is making a mistake. As a coach, you can tell this individual that the only mistake you don't want to see is a passed up shot. Also, give feedback to the athlete when he/she makes this mistake.

Keep the message consistent, and reinforce the shot attempts, even if he/she misses the shot. To keep perfectionist athletes productive, develop competition plans that focus on specific positive behaviors versus plans that primarily focus on avoiding mistakes. A golfer who focuses upon a specific target on the fairway rather than listing all the things not to aim at (bunkers, water hazard, trees) will have a more natural swing. Picking a specific positive target can focus your mind and clear it of worry. Remember this simple concept if, like many coaches, you have your own moments of carrying perfectionism to a fault!

1. R.O. Frost & K.J. Henderson (1991) Journal of Exercise Psychology, 13, 323-335.

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