

"THE INNER GAME"

Lessons Learned in the World of Sports

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My senior thesis in college was "An Analysis of Athletes in Pressure Situations". As a psychology major and student athlete at Princeton University, I had a curiosity to understand the mental aspects which create success or failure in sports and in life – the Inner Game. I have come to learn that the emotions and lessons learned in sports have tremendous applicability to our daily work as insurance and risk management professionals. Please consider the following emotions:

Mental Toughness – An essential ingredient in achieving success in sports is the athlete's ability to focus on a task and not let negative thoughts intrude. A key strategy to confront mental toughness is one's ability to handle pressure. Pressure can be both a positive and negative force. Pressure affects each person differently. Confronted with pressure, athletes may weigh both the benefits of success and the pains of failure at the same time. Seasoned athletes often do not feel pressure. These athletes are so immersed in the game that they do not have time to understand the magnitude of the moment. Mentally tough athletes know how to stay focused and, most importantly, how to deal with adversity. They understand the importance of controlling their emotions. It is this inner strength that allows them to achieve peak performance even in the most pressure packed situations.

Great athletes have a warrior mentality. They stand tall even in the most difficult of circumstances. They understand the importance of demonstrating confidence and poise to their teammates, coaches and fans.

Self Image – An athlete's positive self-image is essential to success. If an athlete does not feel good about himself or herself, their performance will suffer. A negative self-image can hinder the performance of even the most gifted athlete. Because athletes must learn how to deal with anxiety, fear and distractions, positive self-image is an essential ingredient to achieve success.

Commitment – Amazing athletic performances just don't happen. They are a result of tremendous dedication, determination and sacrifice. Commitment starts in the athlete's heart and soul. Every athlete faces numerous obstacles and opposition. Commitment gives the athlete inspiration to carry forward even when confronted with tremendous challenge and turbulence. In life, as in sports, there is no substitute for commitment.

Goal Setting – Athletes are experts at setting goals. At a young age, they learn that goals are essential to their development. Goal achievement brings rewards. Success cannot be measured or achieved without setting specific goals. The seasoned athlete understands that setting goals is an art. Goals set too high or too low can impede progress. Goals improve

performance. Goals improve the quality of practices. Goals are dreams with deadlines. A powerful acronym for goal setting is SMART.

- S -- Specific
- M -- Measurable
- A -- Achievable
- R -- Realistic
- T -- Timeline

Fear of Failure – Fear creates tension, doubt and panic. Fear of failure impacts an athlete’s ability to achieve performance at the highest level. It increases muscle tension as well as the athlete’s heart and respiratory rates. Fear of failure causes narrowed perception and attention as well as diminished cognitive flexibility. Fear of failure is the toughest opponent many athletes ever face. When the athlete is not afraid to fail, his or her chances of success improve dramatically.

Motivation – An athlete’s desire to succeed must be stronger than his or her fear of failure. Motivation is the key. Motivation starts with a sense of purpose. It is rooted within one’s heart and soul. Athletes find motivation in different ways. For some it is a mission to be accomplished. For others it is fulfilling a lifelong dream. Often, this dream turns into a burning desire to reach a specific goal. Playing with purpose and passion comes easily for athletes who are motivated by their desire to achieve.

Visualization – The power of visualization and mental rehearsal has been universally viewed as an effective means to improve athletic performance. Imagery, or visualization, is viewed as one of the most important mental skills for winning the mind game in sports. It allows the athletes to see themselves performing “In The Zone”. When an athlete is “In The Zone”, everything around them seems to slow down. They are able to see the game with clarity and understanding.

Great athletes roll their mental camera before performances. They understand the benefits of creating visible and clear images. Their ability to see themselves succeeding breeds confidence. Confidence is the result of preparation. Preparation begins with a mental game plan.

Positive Attitudes -- Attitudes influence how an athlete acts and feels. Attitude is a choice which has a profound impact on performance. Positive attitude gives an athlete a competitive edge while negative attitude impairs peak performance – especially in team oriented contests. It has been said that 10% of a performance is what happens to an athlete and 90% is how the athlete chooses to react to it.

Golfer Arnold Palmer kept the following saying in his locker:

If you think you are beaten, you are
If you think that you dare not, you don’t
If you’d like to win, but you think you can’t
It’s almost certain you won’t.

If you think you'll lose, you've lost
For out in the world you'll find
Success begins with a fellow's will.
It's all in the state of mind.

Life's battles don't always go
To the stronger or faster man;
But sooner or later the man who wins
Is the man who thinks he can.

In a team setting, teammates are often mirror the athlete's attitude. Positive attitude inspires others to succeed. Negative attitude brings a team down.

Self Discipline - Great athletes are highly disciplined. Hall of Fame athletes often look back upon their careers and understand that an essential ingredient to their success was self discipline. Self discipline begins with setting priorities, designing one's lifestyle based upon achieving goals. In developing a lifestyle of discipline, the athlete learns how to eliminate excuses. Disciplined athletes are highly focused on goals and specific results. They are not focused on the challenge of their athletic performance, rather the rewards of achievement.

The profession of Insurance and Risk Management is not easy. It is a game that requires character, commitment, mental toughness, motivation and positive attitude. The insurance arena is our playing field. An understanding of the "Inner Game" helps us understand the impact of our emotions, actions and attitudes. The lessons learned in sports can help you and me reach peak performance.

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