

I don't divide the world into the weak and the strong, or the successes and the failures, those who make it or those who don't. I divide the world into learners and non-learners.

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Author and scholar

1.3 Cultivating a Teachable Spirit

In 1998, Washington State's Ryan Leaf and Tennessee's Peyton Manning were widely seen as the top two quarterbacks in the NFL draft. NFL fans were on fire with discussion about who would be the better pro.

At 6-foot-5 and 240 pounds, mobile with a strong, accurate arm, Leaf seemed like a can't-miss prospect. He also performed better in big games in college than Manning, which didn't hurt his draft prospects. Ultimately, Manning was drafted first by the Indianapolis Colts and Leaf second by the San Diego Chargers.

Many things affected Leaf's failure in his three turbulent seasons in the NFL, including a wrist injury on his throwing arm. But a key trait that separated Manning from Leaf was Manning's intense desire to get better. While Leaf fought with coaches and teammates and sometimes missed workouts and practices, Manning listened to coaches, watched film endlessly, embraced his teammates, and developed workout routines legendary for their toughness. Never satisfied with what he can do or with what he knows, Manning is coachable and determined to learn. As a result, Manning is a lock for the NFL Hall of Fame.

■ The Nobility of the Sponge

Having a Teachable Spirit is like being a sponge. Sponges seem lowly, but what makes them great is how they soak stuff up and grow in the process. Triple-Impact Competitors are sponge-like, hungry to learn, constantly on the lookout for ideas, tools, anything that will make them better.

If your coach yells at you for a mistake he never taught you about, as a Triple-Impact Competitor you shrug off the yelling and say to yourself, "This is unfair, but I'm not going to let my angry feelings keep me from improving." Most students in a class with a boring teacher tune out and do only enough to get by. With a Teachable Spirit, you ask, "This is boring, but what can I learn from it that will help me?"

Triple-Impact Competitors listen and learn and grow. But many athletes are not sponges. Think about teammates who thought they knew everything, who tuned out coaches and teammates alike, or simply weren't as committed as you. You may have a coach who didn't care what you or your teammates had to offer, even ideas that could have helped the team. Ultimately, an indifference to learning and new ideas limits a team's potential and reduces the fun of being on a team that works hard together.

What to do about it? Set an example and be a sponge. The world's greatest athletes, the world's greatest in any profession, are relentless learners.

■ The Freedom of the Fool

Often what keeps athletes from learning and growing is the fear of looking bad in public. George Leonard turns this idea on its head: "To be a learner, you've got to be willing to be a fool... How many times have you failed to try something new out of fear of being thought silly?"

Kelly Marren, a world class snowboarder and member of PCA's National Student-Athlete Advisory Board, described her experience: "When I first started snowboarding, it didn't bother me to look foolish trying to learn a trick. As I became more prominent, I realized that I was reluctant to try new tricks because I was afraid of being embarrassed." But Kelly remembered that the way to get better was to be willing to look foolish and deal with the discomfort that goes with it.

Kelly has a robust Teachable Spirit and got past her fear, but imagine not trying something fun or interesting because you didn't want to look foolish. Yes, someone might mock you if you look foolish, but the really foolish person is the one who doesn't learn. When you think about it, there is great freedom in being willing to play the fool.

■ The WAG Approach

Here are three effective, simple ways to learn in sports: **W**atch, **A**sk, and **G**et coaching, which I refer to as "WAG."

If a teammate knows how to do something you don't, *watch* what she does and see if you can replicate it. Some athletes deal well with pressure. How do they do it? Watch them. Some athletes are really good at preparing themselves for a competition. What do they do to prepare? Your team's leaders command respect from their teammates and inspire confidence in ways that makes the team better. What, if anything, do they do that you can copy?

If watching doesn't get you there, ask your teammates and coaches. Many great competitors even ask opponents how they do things. Some of the top pro and college coaches in various sports get together after the season to share ideas and try to anticipate the next big trends in their sport. Even though they compete with each other during the season, they cooperate to learn together and increase all of their capabilities in the off-season.

But some things can't be acquired simply from watching and asking. Mastering them requires that you get coaching. A coach can see things you don't. Bill Sweetenham, the former Australian Olympic swim team coach, once explained why athletes need coaches: "The athlete feels the water, the coach sees the stroke."

Some things we just can't learn on our own, at least in a reasonable time period. We need a coach who can "see our stroke" and help us get to new levels of performance. A Triple-Impact Competitor with a robust Teachable Spirit seeks out coaching.

It may seem odd to ask your coach to help you. After all, isn't that his job? Yes, but coaches have so much going on they can overlook opportunities to help players improve. By asking for specific coaching, you are signaling to your coach that you are primed to learn.

Be persistent. Your coach may agree to help you but fail to do so. If so, make it easier for him by being more specific: "I really want to learn that skill. Is there a day this week you can work with me on this after practice?"

■ Fueling Performance

In recent years, many elite athletes have shown their teachable spirit by embracing emerging knowledge from the field of sports nutrition to modify their diet as a way of getting better. Test your knowledge by taking the Sport Nutrition Quiz featured in Exercise 3 on the following page. Then apply what you learn so you can fuel even better performance.

Exercise 3: Sports Nutrition Quiz

The best athletes recognize that there is a strong connection between their nutrition and how they perform. What do you know about how to “eat to compete?” Take the quiz below. Then read about the answers on the following page. In the process, you should improve your nutrition I.Q. and, by doing so, give yourself an edge on the competition.

Mark each statement true or false.

- _____ 1. Some foods are like health magic; others are evil and have no nutritional value.
- _____ 2. Don't snack. It is bad for you.
- _____ 3. Water can make the difference between winning and losing.
- _____ 4. If you want to build muscle, load up on protein – the more, the better.
- _____ 5. Breakfast is the most important meal of the day.
- _____ 6. It is possible to use food to help your muscles recover between practices and competitions.
- _____ 7. The best meal to eat right before exercise should be easily digestible and not heavy on fat or calories.
- _____ 8. Stick to a diet with a few healthy foods that you eat over and over.

Sports Nutrition Quiz Answers

1. Some foods are like health magic; others are evil and have no nutritional value.

False. Every food carries some nutrient your body can use. But some foods carry nutrients way better than others. Sports nutritionist Chris Carmichael categorizes foods into three categories: quality carriers, empty carriers, and pollutant carriers.

- Quality carriers like whole-grain cereal or bread, salmon, chicken breasts, brown rice, and spinach are like yachts. They carry nutrients in style.
- Empty carriers like iceberg lettuce, pretzels, and white rice are like riding in a rowboat.
- Pollutant carriers are foods like doughnuts, fatty chips or candy bars, many fast foods, French fries, fried chicken, and heavily processed foods. Nutrients in them are on a garbage barge. Taking in lots of garbage – saturated fat, sugar, and chemicals – with your nutrients will bog you down and hurt your athletic performance, not to mention your long-term health.

2. Don't snack. It is bad for you.

False. Athletes burn plenty of calories and, as a result, get hungry. Fuel up on healthy snacks between meals. Fruit, bagels, nuts, yogurt, a health bar, and juice can elevate your game. For many athletes, consuming a snack of 200 to 300 calories within an hour or two of a performance can improve results. And, for some sports like baseball or tennis or for lengthy workouts that can last for hours, a snack during the activity helps athletes maintain energy and mental clarity.

3. Water can make the difference between winning and losing.

True. Hydrated athletes compete better than dehydrated ones. Your body is comprised of 60 percent water, and 62 percent of that is

contained in muscles and blood tissue. When you don't drink adequate fluids, your body temperature rises and the blood volume in your muscles decreases. Smaller muscles equal less strength. Drink lots of liquid – water or sports drinks – throughout the day and during hard workouts and competitions.

4. If you want to build muscle, load up on protein – the more, the better.

False. We used to think that eating raw eggs, protein shakes, steaks, and tuna fueled big gains in muscle mass and improved athletic performance. Now we know that loading up on protein doesn't do much because your body isn't equipped to process extra protein. Elite athletes may need a little more protein, but not much more. And most of the protein in protein shakes is flushed down the toilet. Your body just can't absorb it.

5. Breakfast is the most important meal of the day.

Probably. In the morning, your body has just experienced a 10- to 14-hour fast. Your glycogen stores – what gives you the energy to operate well in school and in sports – are low and need to be replenished. Little time for breakfast? Think simple. A bowl of cereal, a yogurt, boiled eggs, a muffin, a health bar, or toast with peanut butter all make good starts to a day and will help you be your best.

6. It is possible to use food to help your muscles recover between practices and competitions.

True. This is critical to maintaining energy and motivation during a long, hard season. If you don't fuel up properly between practices and competitions, your body will wear down and you can hit a wall. What to do?

- Eat something for breakfast.
- Don't skip lunch if you can help it.

- Eat snacks as needed and consume a pre-practice snack that doesn't upset your stomach.
- Keep yourself hydrated.
- After workouts, eat a recovery meal that contains carbohydrates, fat, and protein. In the hour after intense exercise your body will soak up the nutrients from a peanut butter and jelly or turkey sandwich, an energy bar, or a smoothie. This aids recovery and gives you more energy the next day.

7. The best meal to eat right before exercise should be easily digestible and not heavy on fat or calories.

True. This question is way too easy, right? But how many athletes do you know who eat greasy fast foods right before a practice or game? Fatty foods take longer to digest. That's why they can just sit in your stomach. And that's why they can make you sick or slow you down at just the wrong time – when you want to be at your best for yourself and for your teammates.

8. Stick to a diet with a few healthy foods that you eat over and over.

False. Actually, a variety of grains, meat, vegetables, dairy, nuts, and other foods is what you want to shoot for. Sports nutritionist Nancy Clark tells athletes to eat 35 different foods each week. But getting this can be hard, especially when you are busy or don't even do the shopping. Do the best you can and if you feel overwhelmed, consider Michael Pollan's advice in *Food Rules*, "Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants."

Note: These pages contain a few general nutritional guidelines for athletes. Talk with your coach about specific nutritional advice for your sport.

Sources: Nancy Clark's *Sport's Nutrition Guidebook* and Chris Carmichael's *Food for Fitness*.



**BETTER ATHLETES
BETTER PEOPLE**

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