

# With Expectation, Kids Will Always Perceive The Limitations

An excerpt from "Let Them Play" by Jerry Lynch

"Expect nothing, but be ready for anything."

— Samurai warrior saying

Regardless of your child's level of participation in sports, his or her performance will be greatly influenced by expectations. What I've seen from over a lifetime working with athletes is that expectations produce unwanted pressure and consistently result in limited and subpar performances. It doesn't matter if you expect good things or bad things. Expectations are all about the outcome and results, neither of which can be controlled, and this unproductive thinking therefore makes one tight, tense, and tentative, the holy trinity of self-destruction. Expectations come from many sources: they can be driven by coaches, especially those who need results to justify their existence; by overzealous parents seeking to inspire their kids (or perhaps vicariously live through them); by friends and teammates who only want to win; and oftentimes by the child, who may be caught in the trap of measuring self-worth by external success.

Parents are in the perfect position to deflate this performance pressure by helping children understand the problems of having expectations. Whenever you talk with your child about his or her performance, be aware of any tension or unspoken expectations you may carry – since children always pick up on these silent messages, especially when they relate to your personal expectations for them.

Assuming athletes have prepared well, I encourage my athletes, coaches, and parents to embrace only three expectations: expect to do well (by demonstrating what you've practiced and learned), expect good things to happen (such as executing a game plan or doing things correctly), and expect to have fun (by enjoying the process, being with your friends, and learning the game). If preparation is lacking, adjust these expectations accordingly. You can always still have fun by enjoying playing and the learning process, but if you are still mastering basic skills, you may not perform well. When children embody these types of expectations, taking them into their nervous systems, they relax, become calm, remain focused, and play their best. These are process expectations as opposed to outcome expectations. While this may seem counterintuitive, I have had remarkable success with this approach. It completely shifts one's perspective and enhances all performance. According to the wisdom of the *Tao Te Ching*:

**With expectation, one will always perceive the limitations. Evolved individuals act without expectation and succeed.**

Do you know what makes the difference between a good performance and a bad one (or a good day and a bad day)? It's very simple: good performances more often happen when you have no expectations, let your activity unfold, and trust things to work out. You can then relax and focus on the series of actions you need to carry out, which are the little things you can control. Bad performances, on the other hand, happen when you try to control the end result and have high expectations. As I mentioned before, trying to control what you

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can't – the finished product – causes anxiety and tension. This may be the biggest issue facing youngsters around sports performance.

The Chinese symbols for *expectation* show the enjoyment of someone watching the rising and setting of the moon in its natural arc across the sky. In my way of thinking, if your child can flow with nature's organic process and enjoy the work fully in the moment, he or she will truly be fulfilled and will feel successful in sport and life.

"But I want to win," a child athlete may say. Tell him or her, "You will win *if you refuse to expect to win.*" This is a very Zen idea; it is a paradox, but it is also true. If you practice nonattachment to results, your body will be less tight, tense, and stressed, and it will become more relaxed and calm, which leads to playing at a higher level, which increases the prospects of actually winning. If you let go of the need to win, you will be victorious. Maybe not in the game, but in your effort to do well, which is another way of defining what winning is all about.

Consider writing the following on an index card and reading it to your child every day:

*I focus on my practice, my preparation, and the process of my performance plan; when I do, I can expect the best to happen, whatever it may be.*

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