



BETTER ATHLETES
BETTER PEOPLE

PCA Q&A

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Q | 1 What are some of the healthiest mental/social-emotional messages for youth to take from their sports experiences and apply to other parts of their lives?

A During my thirty years of working at professional, collegiate, and secondary levels in sport and performance psychology as well as being a coach of teams, here are messages that I have used consistently and which have resonated in positive ways with athletes, coaches, support staffs, and parents, and which I still use with these groups today:

- Participating in sports is what you do, but it is not who you are
- There is more to life than sport, so live your life to the fullest, respecting others as you would like them to respect you
- Keep your sport in balance with the rest of your life by using your values as your personal anchor point
- Focus on the process of your sport – prepare, compete, and deal with your results – and enjoy the process
- Quality preparation in sport and life, leads to quality performance and being a decent human being
- Your greatest asset and liability may well be yourself
- You are never as good as you think you are or as poor as you consider yourself to be – so be real and remain on an even keel
- Be a good separator of your performance from yourself.

Q | 2 What can coaches do to ensure that youth athletes receive and internalize those messages?

A Based on their personal understanding of the above messages, coaches need to commit in a sincere way to modeling these messages by not only talking about them with their players but also by reflecting on them in their day-to-day coaching experiences.

Coaches can build into their practices a “step-back time” where they sit with the team and discuss some of these messages throughout the season.

Coaches can seize opportune times to point out these messages with their players as well as with their staffs, during practices as well as before and after game competition.

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Q | 3 What is your advice for a player who is struggling to break out of a slump?

A Although the word “slump” is often used in sport, I prefer not to use that word with athletes and coaches; the word connotes negativity and a concern about outcomes and numbers.

My advice, therefore, to players who are not performing as expected is for them to deal with the things over which they have control – before, during and following the game or competition.

Before the contest, players need to make sure they have process – specific routines – that they apply consistently to prepare themselves for games/competition and that they commit to that process, whatever the results. Players should develop productive pre-performance routines – that is, how they get ready for the game – physically, mentally, and emotionally.

During the game or actual competition, players should further take charge of the process by paying attention to things over which they have control, one step at a time while being in the moment – one pitch, one possession, one serve, etc. Players should strive to focus on doing things well in the moment, paying attention to the task at hand, and not focusing on results.

After the game or competition, and in conjunction with their coach, players can review their performances – the plusses and minuses – and determine what they have learned and how to move forward.

Q | 4 How can coaches help when a player is consistently performing in ways that are less than expected?

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1. Make sure that the player has been practicing the correct way to do things in terms of the relevant physical and mental areas and also with respect to the technical fundamentals of the sport.
 2. Encourage players to focus on the process of playing their sport – that is, how they prepare, compete, and assess their results.
 3. Look for the “small daily wins”, that is, the energy and effort that the player manifests during both practice and competition and provide the player with feedback on these kinds of “controllables.”
 4. Do not emphasize results or imply that the player is not “good” at getting results.
 5. Remember that, as a coach, your job is to remain composed and to teach and instruct the player how to respond to the good times and the not so good ones.

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Q | 5 How can coaches handle youth or adolescent athletes who think too highly of themselves or their skills? How does a coach deflate the ego of the player without meanness or crushing the spirit of the player?

A There are two dimensions to the scenario reflected in this question:

The first dimension has to do with the extent to which athletes have learned to be accurate self-evaluators of their performance. In this regard, some athletes have not been instructed in how to view their results and skills in relation to observable and agreed-upon standards. Therefore, the coach can instruct the athlete in how to use objective sources of information – such as examples of other players and in watching their own performance on video and discussing the performance with them.

The second dimension involves athletes who have learned to be self-centered and attentive to themselves and who overvalue their performance and skills over what is real. This kind of athlete may have been told by others – family, friends, other players, coaches – that they are better than they currently are by objective standards, at this point in time. As such, it is likely that the athlete is not a good team player. For this dimension, coaches can discuss their concerns with the athlete, one on one, not in front of others, and certainly not with the entire team present.

Q | 6 What are some of the cues a coach can pick up on to determine how each individual player learns (i.e., visual, auditory, kinesthetic learners)?

A Coaches should not, in my professional judgment, try to identify individual learning styles of their players. This can be a place of misplaced precision on the part of the coach. As far as I know, there have been no validated learning styles inventories that relate to sport whose results have been published in scientific, peer-reviewed journals.

Rather, coaches can best use their coaching time well if they develop and consistently use a sound “sensory-based teaching framework” with individual players. In this regard, I recommend the “VAK” approach is used with all players, both in group and one-to-one situations.

- **V** – Visual — (a) show the individual player what is expected and have the player see these expectations by pointing these expectations out in other players (models) both in live settings and on video and (b) model the desired performance themselves for the player. Most young players are visually oriented by virtue of all of the visual technologies that are available.
- **A** – Auditory — (a) instruct the player in how to pay attention and listen to what is being taught and (b) ask the player to repeat what he or she has heard. In this sense, the coach is helping the player to develop his/her sports listening skills.
- **K** – Kinesthetic — (a) make sure that player has sufficient repetitions on the field or court so that he or she can make progress in solidifying what has been taught through seeing (V) and listening (A); and (b) provide the player with feedback on these repetitions.

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Q | 7 You have talked before about compartmentalizing. Can you explain what that means and how players and coaches can learn to compartmentalize?

A Compartmentalizing has to do with being able to keep one's sport separate from the other part of the life whether the individual is an athlete or coach. It means being able to know when it is time to assume the role of a performer and to let go of other things in one's life for that period of time when they are in performance mode. Then, once the practice or game is completed, the athlete (or coach) can let go of their role as a performer and pick up the other roles that they have in their lives such as being a good student, family member, spouse, etc. Based on my psychological testing of athletes and coaches at professional and collegiate levels during the last 30 years, I have found that being effective at compartmentalizing is typically associated with having good self-esteem, which leads to being a good separator.

Players and coaches can learn to be consistent and effective at compartmentalizing in the following way:

1. Learn to appreciate that sport is only one part of their lives and, in particular, that other people are in their lives.
2. Clarify their values – what are the aspects of their lives, beyond sport, that give meaning to them as a person?
3. Develop daily routines that will signify when they are in performance mode and when they are in life mode.
4. Pay attention to the process of what they are doing, when they are doing it, and do not deal with things that are not in the moment.

Q | 8 What tips do you have for coaches and parents to motivate players to work harder or to try new skills or new mental approaches to trying new skills?

A There are three elements embedded in the above question. I will address each one separately.

I. Setting the conditions so that players who are not putting forth effective effort and intensity can do so.

As the saying goes, "you can lead a horse to water but you can't make the horse drink it." In this regard, if a player does not appear to be putting forth sufficient emotional intensity and physical effort into developing and improving skills, do not jump the gun and ascribe the problem as being a motivational one.

Rather, before that kind of judgment is made, the coach can use the questions, listed below, in working with players around their emotional intensity and physical effort. The coach should respond to these questions in the order in which they are presented and address the issue at hand if the question is not answered in the affirmative, before moving onto the next question:

- Has the player been educated as to what it means and looks like to work hard, with effective energy and effort?
- Has the player been instructed in appropriate mechanics and fundamental skills of the sport?
- Has the player been provided with the "tools" to develop and improve skills, including the use of effective instructional methods and sufficient repetitions?

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- Has the player been given precise and timely feedback when he or she is practicing and performing with effective emotional intensity and physical effort?
- Likewise, has the player been provided precise, timely, and supportive feedback when he or she is not practicing and performing with effective emotional intensity and physical effort?
- Has the player's level of emotional intensity and physical effort been discussed with him or her, in a one-to-one meeting, away from other players and staff?
- Has the player been given the opportunity in a one-on-one meeting to express an opinion about his or her level of emotional intensity and physical effort and how the coach and others as well as the player can work to increase emotional intensity and effort?

II. Trying new skills.

In coaching players to engage themselves in the acquisition and development of a new skill, I strongly suggest using the VAK approach with that player.

Here is a summary of how the VAK approach can be applied by a coach for the skill acquisition and improvement of a player:

- **V** – Visual — The coach should make sure that the player is provided a clear and accurate model of the skill and how the skill is manifested. This model may be a video or the actual demonstration of the skill to be acquired. When doing so, the coach can encourage players to watch and try to see themselves engaging in the skill.
- **A** – Auditory — The coach should discuss the skill to be acquired with the player. As part of the discussion, the coach can emphasize that it will take time for the player to develop the skill and, most importantly, that the staff will work with the player and provide him or her with support and feedback.
- **K** – Kinesthetic — The coach can make sure that there is a plan in place to teach the player how to acquire and develop the new skill. This kind of instructional plan can include specific goals, teaching methods, adequate number of repetitions, and how feedback will be provided to the player in response to the player's demonstration of the skill during practice sessions and actual game performances.

III. Using mental approaches in trying and learning new skills.

1. Players can be encouraged to recognize that, in order to acquire and develop the new skill, they will feel uncomfortable at first, but if they remain confident, then that discomfort will fade into the background.
2. Players can be instructed in how to use visual imagery in order to see themselves performing the skill.
3. Players can be encouraged to focus on the acquisition and development of the skill and not on the results.
4. Players should learn how to listen to the feedback that the coach is providing as they are learning the skill.

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Q | 9 How do players get into “the zone” and how can they stay there?

A A coach or parent should be less concerned about the zone and getting a player into “it” and more focused on helping the player to learn how to take charge of the process of playing the sport so that they can compete with their mind in the moment and enjoy the experience.

If the coaching or parenting concern is about getting the player into the zone and staying in it, then the player actually is being encouraged to focus on an outcome that can be somewhat nebulous and not predictable. Continued attention to this kind of outcome may actually undermine performance, especially for that of youth athletes.

By encouraging players to take charge of the process, rather than to focus on getting into the zone, the coach or parent is helping players to embrace and to engage in the following use of their thoughts, emotions, and actions:

- Prepare for each practice and game so that their mind and body are ready to get the job done between the lines and that they leave all worries and concerns at the locker room door.
- Commit to paying attention to what matters in the moment of each practice or game. This commitment to being in the moment – one play at a time – means that the players will take charge of the following:
 - Keeping their minds in the moment focused on the task at hand (no floating of the mind to the past or to the future)
 - Accepting the situation that is present without judging themselves on it (no judging of what happened or what will happen next)
 - Committing to follow through on the task at hand
 - Enjoying the experience of playing their sport, one step at a time.

In this way, the likelihood will be increased that the players will be able to keep their minds in the moment and to enjoy the competitive experience, more often than not.

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