

DON'T PUT YOUR EGO ON THE LINE EVERY TIME

By Alan Goldberg, Ed.D.

Sally is on her last and best event, vault. All she needs is an 8.50 for her team to win the title. She salutes the judges, runs down the runway, hits the board, explodes off the vault and lands right on her bottom. She has one more chance, one more vault. However, her second vault looks identical to the first vault.

Out of intense feelings of shame she tells herself that she might as well quit gymnastics, that she's nothing but a loser anyway. Later that night she's surprised to find herself beginning to question her decision to go to college the next year. Maybe she just doesn't have the right stuff.

Probably one of the toughest skills for any athlete to develop is the ability to separate his/her worth as a person from the quality or outcome of his/her performance. Too many athletes, like the one described above, make the serious mistake of believing that when they perform poorly, they have something to be ashamed of and that they are less deserving of love and respect than when they win. This way of thinking is terribly destructive, killing the joy inherent in sports and interfering with an athlete's quest for excellence.

When gymnasts compete and their ego is on the line, they set themselves up to fail big. Winning becomes too important and losing becomes a crushing humiliation, something to be avoided at all costs. In this light we can certainly understand the behavior of young athletes who are driven to unsportsmanlike actions.

A preoccupation with winning and losing puts excessive pressure on the athlete, tightening them up physically and mentally. With so much at stake, the athlete's movements get tentative, self-conscious, and awkward. Concentration becomes impossible as the mind races, entertaining distorted fears and the what ifs. "What if I lose?" "What if I blow my dismount?" "What if I drop my hoop?" The athlete is now unable to take the risks so necessary for optimal performance.



Furthermore, athletes don't have fun when they believe their self-worth is on the line. And without the fun, an athlete will not perform up to his/her capabilities.

Winning is definitely important and losing is no fun. There has never been a champion who likes to lose.

In fact, elite athletes hate losing with a passion. But losing, making mistakes, and other set backs are an inherent part of sports, and life for that matter. When you compete, then by definition there will be winners and losers, and usually many more of the latter.

Furthermore, champions know that poor performances provide them with an important



source of feedback for learning and improvement.

When a champion loses, he or she says: "what can I learn from that?" When a loser loses, he/she views the results as concrete evidence of personal failure and inadequacies.

When competing, athletes should stay in the present, performing each move, one at a time. Peak athletic experiences only happen with this present, ego-less focus. Choking experiences in athletics always happen with a past or future focus when you, as a person, think you have a lot to lose. Enjoy the moment by moment struggle in sport competition because this is what it's all about.

Gymnasts don't tumble to get from one side of the floor to the other. It's the participation in and process of competitive sports that is fun, rewarding and teaches us some valuable lessons, not the trophy case filled with pieces of dust-covered metal and plastic.

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