

Creating A Mastery Mindset

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by Jim Thompson

What makes someone a winner? The traditional definition of a winner is the person or team that does the best on the scoreboard. The scoreboard definition of a "winner" involves three key elements: a) results, b) comparison with others, and c) avoiding mistakes.

The scoreboard is everything for many athletes and coaches because our society worships winning at all cost, and tends to dismiss the "good effort" as a loser's motto. There are many problems with a scoreboard orientation, but one defect towers over the rest. It causes many - perhaps most - athletes to perform more poorly! Conventional wisdom says that if you focus on winning (on the scoreboard) you are more likely to win. But the emerging research from sport psychology indicates that a focus on the scoreboard often results in fewer actual scoreboard victories.

Here's one truth for most athletes about a focus on the scoreboard: It tends to increase anxiety. When winning on the scoreboard is everything, athletes spend more of their precious emotional energy worrying about whether they will lose. The problem is that when we are nervous we tend to make more mistakes, and fear of making mistakes causes us to be more tentative and more timid.

Why does wanting to win on the scoreboard increase anxiety? Because we can't control the outcome on the scoreboard! And people tend to become anxious about things that are important to them that they can't control.

While the scoreboard orientation focuses on results, comparisons with others and avoiding mistakes, the concept of mastery is concerned with effort, learning and improvement, and how we respond to mistakes. To help athletes and coaches learn and remember the key elements of mastery, Positive Coaching Alliance (PCA) has developed a memory aid: We say the Tree of Mastery is an ELM Tree, where E is for Effort, L is for Learning and M is for how we respond to Mistakes.

Effort: While the scoreboard orientation focuses on results, mastery is about effort. Did I try as hard as I could? Did I give it everything I had? We want to give our best effort every time we step on the ice. Mastery-minded athletes are more concerned that they try their hardest rather than if they win.

Learning: While the scoreboard orientation focuses on comparison with others, mastery is about learning and continuous improvement. It doesn't matter so much where you start as how much you improve. This can be a tremendous relief because you simply can't control whether you are better than someone else. But you can control whether you learn something and improve. Mastery-minded athletes seek to learn and improve every week in practice and every time they compete.

Mistakes: Most people think it's bad to make a mistake. But mistakes are part of the learning process. In a mastery mindset, mistakes are not dreaded. Mistakes are seen as an inevitable part of the improvement process. You simply can't learn new skills or behaviors that have any degree of complexity without making mistakes along the way. And people who are afraid to make a mistake often don't even try very hard. Give yourself permission to make mistakes. You want to learn from your mistakes and not let them discourage you from working hard.

Setting effort goals are a powerful tool for the enhancing the mastery mindset. Most athletes set outcome goals, which are highly dependent on the quality of one's opponent. Effort goals, though, are largely under one's control regardless of the competition. A beginner competing against an

experienced athlete may lose on the scoreboard but still has a chance to achieve her effort goal.

Outcome goals can discourage beginning athletes and those with less talent because they are largely outside their control. Effort goals are motivating to all players because they can control them and they can see their progress.

Effort and outcome goals are often confused. Here are some examples:

Effort Goal Outcome Goal

- o Attempt a new element in a routine o Land a particular element
- o Skate as hard as you can to the puck o Win puck possession
- o Shoot puck on net, and hit net "x" out of "x" times o Score every time you shoot

It's not to say that athletes and coaches should pay no attention to outcome goals. There is a definite connection between effort and outcome goals. Well-designed effort goals should, over time, move one toward outcome goals. If an athlete focuses on effort goals and begins to achieve them, her performance will improve and, over time, she will begin to achieve the outcome goals she desires.

Jim Thompson is the founder and director of Positive Coaching Alliance (PositiveCoach.org), an ISI partner.