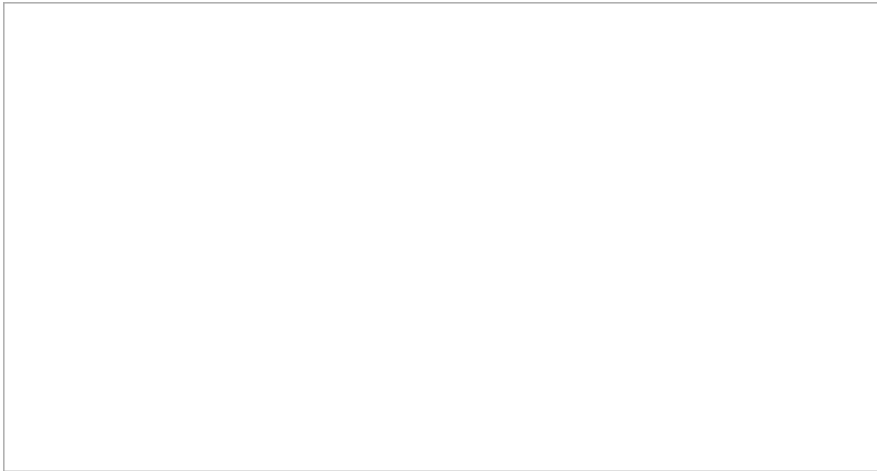


Beware of 'Cotton Wool Coaching!'

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What is cotton wool coaching I hear you ask?

Well we've all heard of the expression, 'she's wrapped up in cotton wool,' usually used to describe an individual (often a child) who is perceived to be '**overly protected**' by their parent.

'Cotton wool coaching' refers to being overly protective of your athletes, by being reluctant or frightened to **expose them to failure and risk**.

For the avoidance of doubt, I am not referring to exposing athletes to **DANGER**, that would be negligent, but instead exposing them to *failure* (if there is such a thing) and the fantastic learning opportunities it provides.

You see, failure is rich in learning opportunities, but only to those that **reflect** on past performance. Failure is in fact **CRITICAL** to success. You cannot have success without failure, so why do we protect our athletes from it so often?

Here are some ways that coaches are often quick to protect their athlete short term, without respecting the lessons and learning opportunities that could be taken longer term:

1. Entering athletes for competitions where they are unlikely to lose or not rank highly.
2. Not providing honest post-performance feedback which will help the athlete improve because it may upset them.
3. Not exposing an athlete to pressurised training environments through fear that it will disrupt their mindset and comfort balance (exactly what it is intended to do!)
4. Not playing fun competitions within your training sessions as not everybody can win, or it may upset somebody who loses.
5. Making excuses on behalf of your athletes as to why things didn't go to plan, as opposed to having honest discussions which will help improve future performance. Coaches who make excuses for their athletes will develop athletes who make excuses for themselves. That's a bad place to be.

I am sure like me you have come across athletes with '**100% syndrome**,' these are athletes that cannot cope with performing poorly or inconsistently and whilst you may think this is a positive trait to have, it can also be quite risky.

Becoming demoralised and having low self esteem through poor performance simply fuels distractive emotions, and may not assist the athlete with focusing on the corrections required. This can be fuelled further by a coach who is also responding emotionally to the performances, and not rationally. **This combination is dangerous.**

Striving for perfection is not a bad thing, it's a great trait, but athletes must understand that the path to success is not a linear process. There will inevitably be bumps, roadblocks and diversions on the way. These hurdles should be perceived positively, safe with the knowledge that adversity can develop resilience.

Resilience and grit are two excellent qualities for an athlete, training the determination to persevere through inevitable adversity and confront fear or uncomfortable situations.

Athletes that 'break' under physical and mental stress have capped potential. Durability is far more important than ability.

Just like it is unlikely that your athletes are naturally competent to perform a double back somersault without prior coaching, it is unlikely they will have the mental tools to deal and confront failure without prior coaching and guidance. To a child, failure is scary (*and to many adults too!*)

The mental strength required to face failure and adversity positively requires proactive coaching. In the same way you would break down a technical skill into chunks and deliver it 'little and often,' you should do the same here too. Drip feeding mental training happens daily, with the messages you are telling your athletes, the review processes you use following competition performances and your approach to facilitating failure in training.

Yes, that's right ... **FACILITATING FAILURE.** Actively *encouraging it*, creating an environment where it is *inevitable, natural*, and most importantly *acceptable*. If you shout at your athletes when they make a mistake, you are not accepting failure, you are critical of it. That will not help an athlete, that will just increase their fear of future poor performance and contribute to 100% syndrome.

Some of you might be reading this and feeling a little skeptical, perhaps curious as to how you can maintain high standards whilst accepting failure. Embracing failure is not about lowering your standards. The bar remains high, but your process for getting there is different. Let's look at a fictional example:

FICTIONAL EXAMPLE 1

I am working with a young athlete who is performing a new skill; a 'stalder' on bars. The athlete, (let's call her 'Lucy,') falls three times in a row attempting the skill. This is a skill she has performed in the previous days absolutely fine. There appears to be no reason why she shouldn't be able to perform the skill successfully on this day also.

Scenario/Coaching Response 1

'Lucy this is ridiculous, there is no reason why you shouldn't be able to do this, drop your hips harder and snap faster under the bar.'

Scenario/Coaching Response 2

I ask the athlete a question;

'Why don't you think you are able to get around the bar?'

Lucy and I have a conversation about it. She tells me her opinion, which is not the correct answer, but it doesn't matter.

'OK, what do you need to do to fix that?'

Lucy answers.

'Great, give it a go and see if it works.'

It doesn't work. She did what she said, but what she said wasn't the correct answer.

'OK, so that didn't work, can you remember the coaching points that we were talking about the last few days?'

Lucy details the coaching points which she remembers and understands. She applies the points and the skill is successful.

Scenario 1 and 2 delivered the same result. Scenario 2 actually took longer BUT:

Scenario 1 motivated through fear, the worst kind of motivation.

Scenario 1 didn't encourage Lucy to think for herself.

Scenario 1 was critical of failure.

Scenario 2 empowers the athlete to think and REFLECT for themselves, and holds the athlete accountable for their decisions.

Scenario 2 builds the athlete - coach relationship by talking to Lucy like an adult, and having a conversation with her.

Scenario 2 accepted failure as part of the process to get to the correct result. There was little consequence of failure.

Scenario 2 didn't require me to raise my words or voice.

Let's look at another fictional scenario.

FICTIONAL EXAMPLE 2

Lucy has a competition in a few weeks time. It is a major competition for her age group and she is performing her routines well in training. She is building confidence with performing her routines consistently and is showing high self esteem.

Scenario 1

What we're doing seems to be working and I don't want to disrupt this so we continue to train in exactly the same manner towards the event.

Scenario 2

I (the coach) understand that training within the confines of a home gym is vastly different than a pressurised training or competition environment. Lucy's current performances are great, but I need to apply pressure and challenge her consistency to mimic competitive environments and stimulus which she will experience on competition day. I decide on a competition preparation strategy which intentionally puts Lucy out of her comfort zone, knowing that it will likely disrupt performance:

1. Our next practise competition will be performed in another local gym to us, on equipment and surroundings Lucy is unfamiliar with.

2. Warm up length will be minimised prior to performing her routines.
3. Lucy will be required to perform routines on consecutive days in the gym, when she may be tired from her previous days performances.
4. Routines will be performed in various other conditions, some in silence, some with a noisy environment, some without a warm up, some with a long wait.

I know that scenario 2 will result in several errors in Lucy's competition routines and superficially this may appear to knock Lucy's self esteem and confidence towards the event, BUT in parallel to this strategy I am educating Lucy on **WHY** we are going through the process and what she and I should expect on its journey. Lucy would benefit significantly from the pressurised training scenarios and profit from this when she eventually presents her routines in an uncomfortable environment - competition day!

Sometimes, you need to unwrap the cotton wool. You may perceive it as 'tough love;' being cruel to be kind. I don't think it is cruel. It's 'coaching', and the coaches job is to prepare an athlete physically, mentally, emotionally for their performances in and out of the gym.

The key to profiting from failure is the reflections that follow. If you don't reflect on your losses or your mistakes, little is learnt from them. You have to make a few wrong decisions to know what a right decision is. A little trial and error.

Are you educating your athletes to reflect and learn from their mistakes? Are you facilitating these discussions with them?

There are thousands of high achieving athletes and individuals who have stories of failure and adversity prior to achieving greatness. If I were you, I would be exploiting these and using these as fantastic examples of how even the world's greats fail. We've all read the famous Michael Jordon quote:

'I've missed over 9,000 shots in my career. I've lost almost 300 games. 26 times I've been trusted to take the game-winning shot and missed. I've failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed.'

What a great quote to form a discussion with your athletes.

Fail and fail often.

Reflect.

Don't make excuses, make progress.

Have a great week.

Nick

PS. A fantastic book I have recently read is called '**Black Box Thinking**' by Matthew Syed, author of 'Bounce.' The book is dedicated to the importance of failure when striving for success, and emphasises how important self reflection is in order to profit from failure. [CHECK IT OUT HERE](#)

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