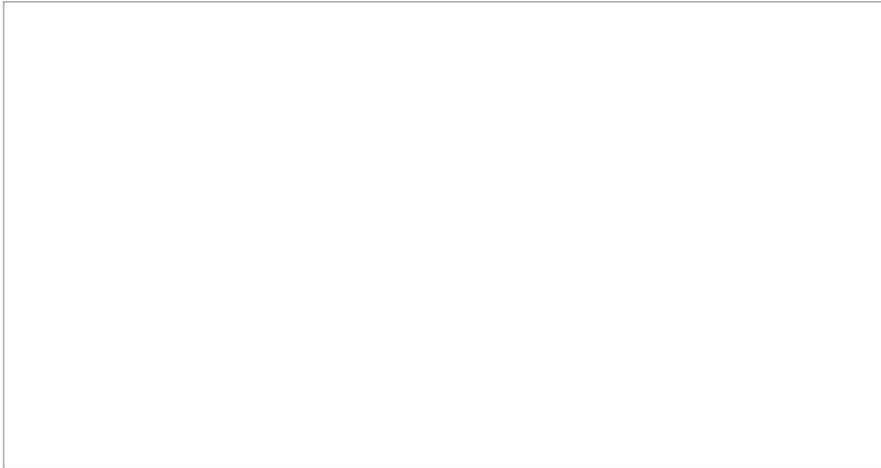


In the Shadows

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This might split the audience a little, but I want you to consider a scenario for me, which may be evident in your club right now.

You have a top athlete, who out-performs the rest of the group/team always.

You also have an athlete who is **second** to your top performer in the way that they train and perform. They work hard, but may never reach their optimum performance, not as a result of a lack of potential but due to being **overshadowed** by their higher performing peer.

True?

I want you to think about this hypothetical scenario for me;

IF your top athlete moved on to another club, got injured or retired for any other reason, would your **second best athlete** suddenly shine more?

It's considered a cardinal sin to have 'favourites' when coaching, but higher performers *do* often receive more attention than their lower performing peers, which is often interpreted as 'favouritism' by their rival teammates. If time was split equally for everybody, would the athletes with the highest potential reach optimum performance?

Probably not. It doesn't sound 'right' but it might be the truth.

So if your second tier athlete suddenly became the **top** athlete in the club, and therefore demanded more of your time, would they realise a greater destiny than if they were still in the shadow of their higher performing peer?

I've seen many scenarios where great athletes are in the shadow of a higher performing team mate, and instead of being motivated and driven by their peers' performances and results, they actually find it *decreases* their own self esteem and self worth.

They struggle to be in the shadow of somebody else's spotlight. It's not always motivating, it's often **demotivating** for young athletes. They may not have the mental capacity to comprehend and manage other people's success.

The two types of mentality here are known as '**scarcity**' and '**abundance**'.

An individual with a '**scarcity mindset**' will be threatened by another person's success, as they believe that another's achievements are taken from a slice of their own 'success pie' and that there is only so much to go around.

An individual with an '**abundance mentality**' is happy for others to succeed as they understand that their success does not threaten their own chances of success also, there is room for everybody in life to be high achievers.

Steven Covey, author of the legendary book the '**7 Habits of Highly Effective People**', talks about the 5 emotional cancers that we should stay away from:

1. Complaining
2. Criticising
3. Competing
4. Contending
5. Comparing

Being competitive in a sporting context is a key attribute for athletes and coaches to be internally driven to improve performance. Internal competition can be extremely healthy and when in place, can ease the job of the coach when lighting the athletes' self drive to perform better.

But a) wanting to beat somebody to ensure they don't win, and b) wanting to beat somebody in order to be the best, are two contrasting philosophies. Only one can result in sustained happiness, as the reality is everybody will be beaten at some point, and many will be beaten a lot.

The worst thing a coach can do when coaching an overshadowed athlete is publicly or openly compare them to their team mate, cementing in their mind their inferiority to their higher performing peer;

'What are you doing, you don't see 'Katie' performing like that do you?'

'Katie can do these in her sleep, why are you struggling so much?'

'If you want to be more like Katie you're going to have to work harder.'

Feedback like this creates a self fulfilling prophecy which is being cemented into the athletes' belief system, breeding a mindset of jealousy (*contending*), bitterness (*complaining/criticising*) and lack of self esteem (*comparing*.)

Here are some of my top tips on this topic:

- Praise progress. However small. It's the small daily wins that amount to significant growth, and athletes of all levels like to be informed of each positive step in the right direction.
- Educate the athlete to focus on improving their own performance, and by benchmarking success against their own development, not always the results of others. Another person's performance is not in their control (always control the controllable.)
- Educate the athlete (all of them!) about the road to success, the adversity on the way and the pitfalls they will experience.
- Educate the athletes that life is not fair, it never will be. Not in business, not in relationships, not in careers and not in sport. Nobody is entitled to anything. You accomplish what you work for, but often in sport, it's not always the hardest worker that wins. It's just the way it is, get over it and get used to it.

- As a coach, never speak to your athlete about injustice performances, scores or rankings. Your emotional intelligence and rationale thinking is contagious, and I have seen several athletes adopt the poor attitudes of their coaches as they are within their direct circle of influence.
- Avoid comparing athletes publicly in their performance to try and create motivation. It is demotivating, lowers self esteem, and provides an uncontrollable reference for their progress.
- Don't put all your eggs in one basket, your top athlete will someday finish, get injured, lose interest or transfer to another club. The depth of your programme is critical to sustained success.

As always, I would be delighted to hear your views, personal experiences and comments on this blog post so please leave a comment.

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