Learn from Mistakes

Whether it’s practice or during a competition, mistakes occur. What is the best way to get better fast?

Ask players the following questions during practice after you see the mistake made or after the game or during a break in the action if an immediate adjustment is called for. Not all the questions will be necessary, but depending on how much information you may want to obtain, any or all can be appropriate.

Questions to ask your athletes: • What went wrong? • When did it go wrong? • Was there anything you could have done to prevent the mistake from happening? • Is there some type of information you need from me (the coach) to not make this mistake again?

Questions to ask yourself: • Is this mistake something we see happening with other players? • What or how will we do things differently next time to give us a better chance of success?

Welcome to 2003-75th Issue

2003 is here. We usually include a survey with this issue, but instead we ask you to write and tell us what articles, interviews, or stories you want to read in a future issue.

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Concentration

Ravizza on 4 R’s of Performance Cycles

We interviewed Advisory Board member and host of the Ultimate Sports Performance video Ken Ravizza to discuss the importance of effectively working through “performance cycles”. Athletes go through certain psychological steps or responses while competing, regardless of the sport. The 4 R’s - Recognition, Release, Refocus, Ready, plus Responsibility - all come into play. In the first of a two part article, we will dig deeper into this crucial area of sports performance using examples from football and tennis.

Responsibility is the first step in making sure athletes have their mental house in order. How important is it for athletes to take responsibility for their own performance? Let’s look at an example of a tennis player who just double faulted. He’s ticked off, but now he has to move over to the other side of the court. How should this athlete handle him or herself mentally?

Responsibility is the concept that engulfs the whole thing. If you’re not going to take responsibility for your performance, you can forget everything else we’re going to discuss here. Basically you are saying, ‘my performance is out of my control and is being handled by the cosmic forces.’

Once the athlete is willing to take responsibility, then he or she has got to do some things: 1. I’ve got to recognize where I am. I just double faulted, I’m pissed off. It could also be that double faulting was okay, because those were two very good serves. I’ve got to stick with it, it’s going to be okay.

The person has to decide where they are mentally. I like to use a signal light analogy: Green light is go, yellow is watch out, red is be ready to stop and regroup.

What are some questions athletes should ask themselves to find out where they are mentally? What do you experience when the garbage is hitting the fan for you? When do I start to spin out of control? What happens in your body in terms of heart rate, blood pressure, muscle tension? What happens in terms of your thoughts? Do you lose focus? Do you start doubting yourself? What happens to your behavior do you slow down or speed up? These are all great questions to help the athlete quickly recognize where they are.

Okay, let’s get back to the tennis player. Talk about the release phase. They have 30 seconds from when the point is scored until they have to serve again. They have a 30 second window to work things out.

Here is the mind set. I just double faulted, I’ve already got negative self-talk going. I know I have to do something to release it and let it go. How do I let go of it and release it? The release may be picking up the ball, turning around to walk back to where I’m going to serve and saying a favorite phrase.

I may grip the racquet and squeeze to release and blow off some steam. Now I have to step over to that point where I’m done with that last serve. The athlete may squeeze the racquet, walk back to the cage area and have a spot to look at. Looking at that spot reminds me to stand tall, get ready and focused. Now I step to the line, I’m good and ready.

What happens to the athlete during the refocus and ready phase?

What do I need to do right now? What’s my plan? Once I have my plan, I need to commit to it. If I’m going to do this type of serve, commit to doing it. Don’t just sort of see what happens. A key part of having a good plan and refocusing is the commitment that goes to the plan.

See Performance Cycles, Page 7...
Athletic Performance Cycles, continued from page 1

First thing that you need to do as a quarterback is to make sure you have everyone’s attention. The inexperienced quarterback will come in the huddle and start spitting out the play and half the players aren’t even looking at him and half the players aren’t listening. He first needs to get the players attention.

Ready, eye contact, we’re going to do this play. Now the information is given. Then he breaks the huddle. Inhale, exhale. As he walks up to the line of scrimmage, he needs to be reading the defense. So he’s picking up some cues. His energy has to be outwardly focused. If he’s into ‘I gotta do this or that’ or he’s cussing about the last play, he’s not going to read the defense as well.

Now, he comes up to the line of scrimmage. I encourage quarterbacks to inhale and exhale as they come out of the huddle. Take a good breath right there. Some of them may take another breath as they put their hands under the center. The play is executed. Move on to the next play. If I screwed up, I’ve got to release some stuff before I get back to the huddle. So the play begins in the huddle, it doesn’t begin at the line of scrimmage. That is an important concept to emphasize.

When I worked with Nebraska football for three years under former coach Tom Osborne, he said that I could help him out on two related issues.

First, when our players make a mistake, they hold on to it. Second, we’ve got to get better focus in the huddle. We went through this with the staff and the first day of fall ball after the guys had stretched. Tom brought them down to the end zone and I sat out there and we basically went through forming the huddle. We went through the whistle just blew, your job is to be present when you get back to the huddle. If you have to release stuff, do it, but when you get in that huddle we need you there - mentally ready.

You often hear about players being fine in non-pressure situations, but tightening up and “choking” when stakes get higher. How can athletes prevent this from happening?

The issue becomes, “where does the breakdown in performance occur?” Is the person failing to recognize it? Do they recognize and then not release. Do they regroup? How is their body language? Are they refocused? Are they thinking clearly and are they committed to what they are going to do? Are they trusting themselves and just doing it?

The key is to find where the mental breakdown occurs. This is where the coach has to find out what’s going on. That’s the coach's role or the sports psychologist role.

Can the player go through the 4 R’s? Can they keep them in the right sequence? The routine functions to give athletes something to do consciously. If we’re going through the light signals, all the negative stuff has a much lesser chance of entering the mind and interfering with performance.

I want the routine to be conscious. I do not want the routine to be automatic. Once a routine is automatic, it’s a habit pattern. The routine is something athletes do to get themselves where they need to be mentally.

If the lights are green, I’m just going, it’s pretty much just automatic. So if the signal is green, go forward, it’s no big deal. If it’s yellow, I’ve got to do other things.

A lot of athletes say that to me, well I do this or that and it’s automatic. Well if it’s automatic, then by definition you can do it without thinking about it which means then you can do it without beating yourself up, or screwing yourself and all that stuff.

Performance routines or cycles can’t come from a coach by telling the athlete what he or she needs to do. It needs to be their thing.

Next month: Open sport examples of the 4 R’s, plus getting comfortable with being uncomfortable during performance.

John Sikes, Editor