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What does winning mean?

I recently attended the Sport Leadership Conference in Calgary. This is the annual gathering of all of the national sport leaders. I especially enjoy it when we heard the Olympians speak on the lessons from Beijing. I want to share a few of the key learning's from the conference.

Role of the coach

As a coach of team sports I have always believed we have two main jobs:

1. Make each individual the best he/she can be.
2. Make the individuals play as a team.

After hearing numerous athletes speak I have added another;

3. **To build dreams.** All of the athletes spoke with passion about their coaches who built and helped them maintain their dream.

As coaches, we never know who it is or when it is that we may spark that dream. Our job is to believe in our athletes. When the competition is fierce, we need to be their friend not their adversary.

German Study

One of the most interesting sessions I attended was a study of Olympic athletes by Dr. Arne Guillich. He interviewed over 6000 Olympians from Athens and the majority of German Olympic team. This is some of the first empirical data that looks at the long-term success or failure of elite sport systems. Some of the key findings were:

- Pursuing early success lead to no success in the future – There is nothing wrong with competition at younger ages. When there is competition they will be winners and losers. The problem is in the methods used to pursue early success.
- Early specialization = Early exit – Few if any of the Olympians (the exception were the gymnasts and divers which are early maturing sports) specialized early. In fact winning at the junior level often meant no success at the senior level.
- High volume of multi-sport at a young age – At younger ages the future elite athlete participated in a variety and number of sport. They used these years to “sample” what was available.
- Offered vs. Ordered – The future elite athlete succeeded when he/she was given a choice. When order into training programs, morning workouts, sport schools etc. he/she did not come out at the elite end. The athletes spoke of doing these things because they wanted too, they could see how it would help them achieve his/her goals. It was not always fun, but he/she made the choice or commitment.
- Yeah, but... - Many coaches are fearful of change. Even when presented with the data they rationalize how it can be true for other, but not for their team. “My players are the exception”.

Frank Dick

Frank Dick is the former national team coach of the British Track and Field Association. He is in my opinion one of the best speakers on coaching in the world. Every time I hear him speak, I learn something new. He shared with us a story about the definition of winning.

He was in Scotland giving a coaching clinic to a group of coaches. He was outside at the track meeting with the coaches, when a little girl came up to him. Pulling on his jacket, she asked if he would come and coach her. She had heard that he was a good coach.

“Not right now I am busy helping these coaches.” he responded, “but if you’re patient I will come and work with you after I am done.”

When he was finished, he went and spent sometime helping her. He enjoyed his time with her, as she was eager to learn.

By chance, he was still in town the next day when the school was having its field day. He happened to be at the track when the little girl was getting ready to run her race. When the gun sounded, she flew off the line, but struggled all the way down the track trying to stay up with obviously more mature girls. At the end of the race, she finished eighth out of eight runners. Dejected she came up to Frank and said; “I lost. I am not a very good runner.”

“What do you mean you lost? That was the best 20 seconds I have ever seen you run.” Frank exclaimed to the little girl.

“You were the best you, you could have been today and that is all that matters. I am still in town tomorrow; if you want, I will work with you. We can see how we can improve on those 20 seconds.”

Note: noticed how he **offered** her the opportunity not **ordered** her to practice.

All the next week he worked with her as he was still in town. At the end of the week, the little girl ran another race. Again, she finished eighth out of eight runners. This time she was beaming when she approached Frank.

“I won, I ran the 100 metres in 18 seconds”, she proclaimed.

“Yes you did win, you were a better you today, I am so proud of you”, replied Frank.

The person who is your opponent is you. You cannot benchmark yourself against other people. You are the best in the world at being you. Don’t try to be someone else, just be a better you.

If he had finished the story here it still was a great story, but this is why Frank is such a special educator. He had to drive the point home.

“I know what a lot of you are thinking. Frank that is ok for a little girl or youth sports, but I coach Olympians. If I don’t win medals, if I don’t beat someone I have not won.”

He proceeded to show us a film clip of the men’s 200 metre sprint finals from Beijing. At the top of the turn, he stopped the DVD just as Usain Bolt was finishing the first 100 metres. The time on the clock was 9.79.

“Look at that” Frank cried out with excitement in his voice. “He is two metres ahead of anyone else in the race. He could hop home on one leg and still win, but he knows that winning is not about beating the other runners. It is about being the best Usain Bolt he can be on that day. Let’s watch.”

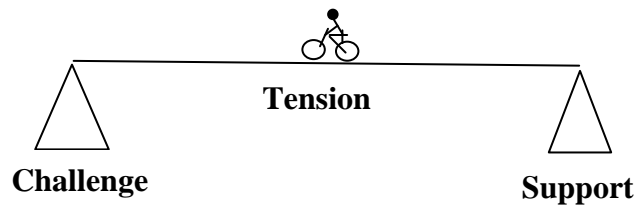
The final 100 metres we see Usain Bolt continuing to pour it on and break a world record that many thought would stand for a long time. Even at the highest level, it is about being the best

you that you can be.

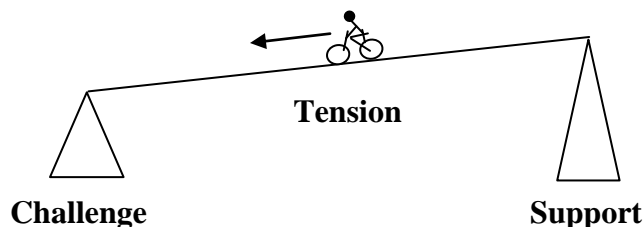
Last Wednesday I went to watch the Raptors play the Sixers. In the first half, with less than a minute to go, Chris Bosh missed two foul shots that would have tied the score. The crowd was obviously disappointed as it was the closest the Raptors would come all game. At half time, I saw something happen I have never seen happen before. With 7:59 to go in the half time Chris Bosh came out of the locker room to shoot foul shots. The lights were not on and there were no ball boys or assistant coaches present to pass him the ball. He was obvious upset at his performance in the first half. He was not the best Chris Bosh he could be that opening half and he wanted to make amends. He never missed a foul shot the rest of the game. He was not competing against the Sixers, he was competing against Chris Bosh.

Coaching is like riding a bicycle on a tightrope

Frank Dick also made use of an excellent analogy to help coaches understand the dual role we have in helping athletes develop.

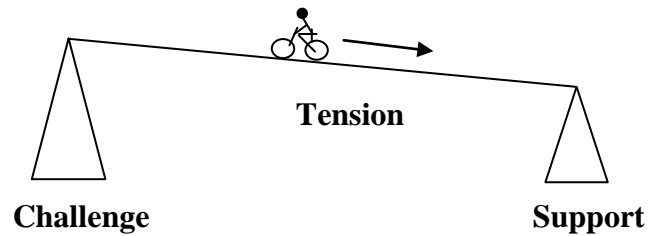


In order for the tightrope walker to stay on the wire there needs to be **tension**. The two pillars on each end of the wire provide this tension. In our analogy of coaching these are **challenge** and **support**. The coach is constantly judging how much of each element is required to keep the wire taunt so the athlete is able to perform his/her skills, which is symbolized by riding the bicycle on the wire.

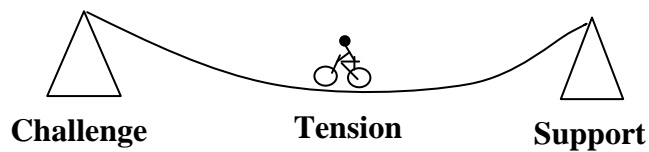


If we give the athlete too much support, the athlete will speed down the wire too fast and run

head long into a challenge. He/she will not have the skills necessary to face the challenge, when it appears, because a progressive approach of moving from dependence to independence has not been provided.



If the athlete is given too much of a challenge he/she will slide backwards. The athlete will seek support from the coach. If the coach does not give support, the athlete will not have the confidence to try the task. He/she will see it as too steep of a challenge.



If the tension is nonexistent, athletes are stuck in the middle. Their skills do not develop and the player's development stands still.

There is no book to tell us the exact amount of tension that is required at any given time. Coaching is an art and a science. Science tells us we need to give support, but also challenge the athlete. The art of coaching is to figure out the right proportion of each element.