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Competitive Athletes Can Learn a Lot from a Nine Year Old Boy

By Todd M. Kays, Ph.D.

Sport Psychologist

I was recently in West Virginia where I had the opportunity to race down white water rapids in a kayak with a nine year –old named Jake. We were thinking about getting on the traditional large raft with about 6-8 other people and a professional guide, but we both wanted to experience something a bit different. Little did I know that I would learn a valuable lesson as a sport psychologist and one that all athletes could benefit - all from a third grader named Jake. As we were racing down a level three rapid (highest is five), both Jake and I tumbled out of the kayak and were immediately sucked into the current and tossed about like rag dolls. Upon getting our barriers, both Jake and I got back into the kayak with the help of a near-by raft (it was late in the day and I was extremely tired!). We meandered on and finished the course. On these trips, they take video in the hopes that rafters will buy the DVD at an enormously high price. Of course we bought one because the scene where Jake and I took this tumble out of the kayak was vividly captured on video. We all had some good laughs, some more than others, but this video illustrated a wonderful lesson for athletes.

In the video, Jake was smiling and composed as we entered the level three rapid, but I had a serious look and was quite tense. What if we fall?! Part of the reason for the spill was due to my compromised ability to handle the kayak because of the all of the tension easily displayed in my body. I was fearful of the consequence of falling, being embarrassed in front of all the others rafters and possibly getting hurt. Jake did not have this fear as you can plainly see he was all smiles. Enter the lesson - all too often athletes' performance is drastically inhibited because of fear. And when do they experience fear? As they get older and enter more competitive situations. Simply stated - fear causes muscle tightness, which in turn prevents fluid smooth performance.

Why do athletes become more fearful as they grow up? Part of the reason is that they begin to understand consequences of winning and losing and the evaluation of performance by others. By the time athletes are adolescents, they have already typically been tainted by fear – fear of losing, making a mistake, embarrassment, being criticized in front of others, being taunted by opposing teams or even their own teammates. This attitude around fear many times does not change and becomes an unfortunate factor preventing athletes from reaching their true potential. In extreme cases, it can dramatically shorten the length of an athlete's competitive career.

Every competitive athlete knows fear and has experienced at some point its damaging impact. What do we do? Here are a few things to keep in mind. These are just tips and all athletes must realize that the “mental muscle” needs worked and practiced just like any other one in their body. Work the following three mental tips in daily workouts and see what happens.

1. Spend some time thinking about moments in your athletic career, particularly as a child, that you “just played” without thought of consequences or fear of making mistakes. Keep these times in mind each and every day.
2. All great athletes experience fear – they choose and learn, however, to walk through the fear and not let it control them.
3. Making mistakes in sports is inevitable at every level. Typically, the ones willing to make the mistakes are the best athletes. Making mistakes is unavoidable, but how you respond to them is your choice – make the right one.

Keep these tips in mind in your practice each and every day. Think about the process, not the outcome and let your true ability shine on a consistent basis.

Play Hard, Play Smart and Play Well!