

Abandoning Perfection

By April Clay, Registered Psychologist

I can't tell you the number of times I have heard it proclaimed proudly: "I am a perfectionist!" Many an athlete loves to shout this from the roof tops. And why not? Aren't perfectionists hard working, go-getting winning personalities?



Yes and no.

Yes, they are incredibly hard working, but not always winning. Sometimes this ability actually becomes compromised. The trick is to keep the good stuff about being a driven kind of athlete, and temper the qualities that can lead to dead ends.

The perfection loop

You begin with setting very high goals. After all, you want to excel in your sport and believe you can only do this by expecting the best. But, in your case, 'best' becomes perfection. This automatically means unreasonable since perfection is not a high goal, it's an impossible one.

To illustrate this point, I often will ask people in my office to demonstrate what perfection is. I say, "Let's imagine we are at the world chair sitting championships. Everything hinges on you being able to sit perfectly. How are you going to do that?" They inevitably look at me like I've lost my mind, but we always have a good discussion after this. There is no sitting perfect, there is sitting well, and this can mean many different things.

At this point in the trap, it becomes evident that you cannot reach your goals. You of course keep trying, but always seem to miss slightly. You might hear others comment on the good points about your rides, even your coach. But you have a way of dismissing this feedback. You like to point out in detail what wasn't up to par. Others may even get frustrated with you and tell you to lighten up or go easier on yourself. Secretly you think, "What kind of advice is that? I need to kick myself in the butt harder or I'll never make it."

Next you begin to feel the effects of spending so much time feeling like you are missing the mark. You feel demoralized while at the same time are aware of a very large chunk of pressure resting on your shoulders. This combination may begin to affect your behaviour. You may give up easily or even begin to avoid your training.

The last part of the loop is a lot of self criticism and blaming. You berate yourself for not succeeding and try to motivate yourself with punishment and harsher language. What makes the perfectionist loop complete is that you set new, sometimes harder goals thinking if “I just try harder I will succeed”. So you start yourself for the next round, only to find yourself back in the cycle taking another miserable trip.

Consequences

The outcome of this type of thinking is pretty obvious: low self worth and sometimes even anxiety and depression. Many times learning is compromised or slow. Some people end up giving up on things they love to do because they feel they aren’t good enough to participate. There are also other casualties seldom talked about.

Your team mates are also impacted by your perfectionist approach. Often perfectionists end up applying their very high standards to others. It can result in becoming too impatient and rigid in your expectations of your team. It can also mean “over functioning” as an athlete, trying to control too many elements of your sport. Not exactly a habit that encourages a team approach, rather one that tends to result in some irritated players and coaches. In short, perfectionist behaviour ends up being exhausting for all involved.

What to do

First you will have to acknowledge to yourself that perfectionism is not a desirable goal. Next, you will have to look at changing your thinking to reflect this awareness. Some of the following strategies can be helpful in your quest.

- Set realistic, reachable (and challenging) goals. You can start by taking a look at where you are right now and asking yourself what your next steps could be.
- Make sure you set short term goals, not allowing yourself to set another in that area until it is reached. This way, you can really see the progress you make, and that’s a sure esteem booster.
- Watch how many times you say “have to” and “should” to yourself. Replace these statements with ones that reflect what you “want to” do. You’ll be surprised how much less stressed you’ll feel.
- Realize there is no perfect performance. Each performance that you give will be different, just by virtue of the variables involved. You cannot control everything so don’t even try.
- Adopt a new word/concept/approach. Instead of thinking “perfect” how about excellence? Strive for a hard working approach that still allows you to be flexible when errors occur or progress is slow.

- Place value on the process of becoming a better athlete, and realize it can be enjoyable. Your goals should also reflect this value. Make sure your goals focus on process and not win/lose outcomes.
- Confront the fears that may be driving your perfectionism. Ask yourself, “What is the worst that could happen?” Remember that mistakes, periods of frustration and feeling stuck are all a normal part of the learning process. Everyone, even professionals, experience them.
- Keep an eye out for black and white thinking, and try to practice with shades of grey. You don’t succeed or fail. Every performance is a mixed bag of things both effective and not effective.
- Increase your awareness of the expectations you have for yourself, your team mates and significant others in your life. When you do find areas where unrealistic expectations have cropped up, consciously replace these with more reasonable thoughts.
- Learn to love mistakes. See them as a daily part of your training experience. When one occurs, practice being thankful for the learning that just took place.
- Ask others to give you feedback about the positive changes you are making. Tell them you’re looking for changes in your behaviour (for example- more resilience toward mistakes), and changes in your thinking style (more positive talk when reviewing plays, the ability to stay more task oriented and stay away from judgments)
- Constantly remind yourself that you are not lowering your standards, only redefining them. This will be one of the bigger challenges of the change you are trying to make. Many people end up feeling they are “slacking” and go back to old, bad habits. Stay on track with the goals you have set and you will see progress.
- Think of all the advantages of becoming a non-perfectionist seeking person: you’ll be happier with you, and others will be happier in your company!

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