

FEBRUARY 2012



Lessons from sport for the 'real world'

BY DR. PETER JENSEN, PERFORMANCE COACHING FOUNDER

I've been doing a lot of sessions with athletes recently and it hit me the other day that many of the questions they ask could just as easily have come from those of you in the work-place. I was down at the University of Toronto doing a session with track athletes and a pole-vaulter asked me what to do about the fact that no matter how much work he did he thought it wasn't enough. Just that day I had been on a conference call with some people in Austin, Texas. We are presenting an upcoming workshop for sales executives. One of the presenters was talking about generation Y and their need for perfection and their high degree of self-criticism.

Peggy and I are working with a varsity volleyball team and the vast majority of the team scores very high on self-critical.

I often feel the need to reveal my weaknesses to these folks in order to prove to them that they don't have to be perfect. I asked the young Pole-vaulter what academic percentage he would guess I held when I graduated from high school. He knows that I have a Ph.D. and am well respected within my field. He didn't know of course but I let him know that my graduating average was 64%.

How many universities would a student get into today with 64%? The point is the current generation has been pushed to be high achievers. Many push themselves through fear of failure and motivate themselves through self-criticism. There are some situations where this can be helpful; they are rare. These methods become self-defeating—particularly when you enter into a high performance arena over a long period of time. You cannot continue to be the heckler in the crowd of your own performance and achieve at a high level. The price becomes too high. When you're young it can undermine your confidence and create anxiety. When you are older it begins to affect your health and relationships. I asked him if he would motivate his best friend the way

You cannot continue to be the heckler in the crowd of your own performance and achieve at a high level—the price becomes too high.

he motivates himself. His answer was a very quiet, “no.” I pointed out that there couldn't be one rule for motivating everyone else and a completely separate rule for him.

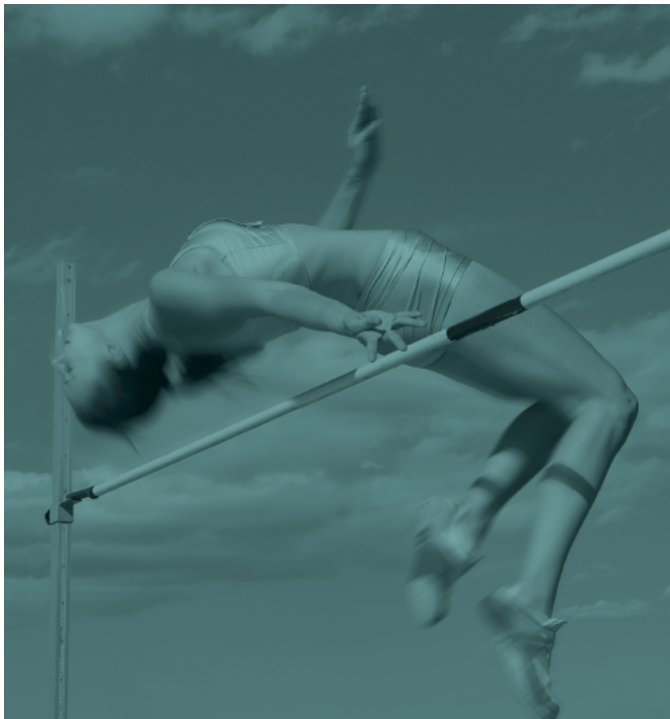
Try to remember this the next time you are motivating yourself, your staff, and your children. Being pulled by something we want and running toward something we choose is a very different internal state than running from fear and criticism. And even when we do not feel we have choice around certain tasks—we need to challenge ourselves. We have choice around how we will approach the task. We do not choose our inner state to please someone else or achieve someone else's goal; we change it because we can and because it is the best-case scenario for us.

Several athletes asked about the problem of overanalyzing, over thinking. I pointed out that this behaviour, in many ways, turns them back into beginners. One of the reasons that you train, with good form, repetitively, is to make skills automatic and to move the locus of control for those skills out of the frontal sections of the brain and into the back. If we start over-analyzing and over-thinking while we are performing we move back into beginner brain and become slightly more hesitant, losing our flow and rhythm. If you are figuring something out then beginner brain is good. Once you have learned it and have to perform it what you really want to achieve is flow, the best performance of what you've got. Know when to stop thinking and start performing. Have strategies in place to help you notice and remember that your job now is to perform, not to analyze and evaluate. Support the performance.

My suggestion to athletes is to find 2 or 3 qualities that they want to have in their performance; balance, strength, power, flow, lightness, solidity, or whatever and focus on finding those qualities in their warm-ups rather than getting caught up in technical self instructions and analysis. One of the golfers I worked with on the PGA Tour would quietly hum or sing so as to stay in the flow of his game and not get overly analytical. What qualities do you need to access and communicate in your key performances? What will help you access those qualities? And do you practice accessing those qualities when you are 'training'; when you are preparing for your performance events? The mental training requires practice as well as the technical. All skills require repetition to be well learned, including the mental skills.

Being pulled by something we want and running toward something we choose is a very different internal state than running from fear and criticism.

A high jumper asked me why she couldn't visualize certain parts of her approach and jump. Before I could answer a veteran athlete said to her, "it's probably because you don't have clarity on the technique or what you are really trying to do." This is an excellent answer! Often when we can't get a clear image of how we want to carry something out it means that we don't have a clear understanding of how to do it. We may know how to do most of it but there may be some part where we lose the image, or the image changes each time we visualize it. I once had a gold-medal Olympic diver write out in detail a dive she was having trouble with. We gave those details to the coach. He quickly saw that her inner picture of the dive was very different than what was required. Once the picture was changed the dive became more consistent. If you notice inconsistency in your performance, or uncertainty in your execution, check to see if you have a clear image of what you want to perform or achieve. Can you see it? Or are there places that are hazy—where you need to clarify what it is you want to do.



Finally, I got a lot of questions from summer Olympians on dealing with the monotony of repetitive training day after day. We talked about creative ways to energize and motivate oneself in practice. In some instances it meant competing with an imaginary opponent, in others setting up small daily

If you notice inconsistency in your performance, or uncertainty in your execution, check to see if you have a clear image of what you want to perform or achieve.

challenges and goals and rewarding yourself when you hit them. Assuming you are getting enough sleep and healthy food; how can you make what you're doing more playful and fun and therefore bring more energy to it? Yes, it is your job. And you have the capacity to do it. Just flex those mental muscles.

Coaches can get bored too with the repetition. One of the coaches told me about an interesting realization he had after one of our talks. "When you are coaching you have to learn something about the athlete or you are not coaching. Therefore you can't be talking all of the time." He then went on to talk about how he was now asking better questions and therefore getting much better information allowing him to coach more effectively. Now there's something those of us who lead can all learn from!

Copyright © 2013 Performance Coaching Inc. All rights reserved. We welcome your comments on this article. Please send them to info@performancecoaching.ca. Learn more at www.performancecoaching.ca.