

MINDFULNESS SKILLS

***for* ACHIEVING**

PEAK PERFORMANCE

& FINDING FLOW

***in* SPORTS & LIFE**

**A
STILL
QUIET
PLACE
FOR
ATHLETES**

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CHAPTER 14

For Coaches

A common mistake among those who work in sport is spending a disproportional amount of time on “x’s and o’s” as compared to time spent learning about people.

—Mike Krzyzewski, Duke University men’s basketball coach and Olympic gold medal coach in 2008 and 2012

Thank you for reading this chapter. While I sincerely hope that you have read this book all the way through from the beginning, I realize that you may not have. So let’s begin with a definition:

Mindfulness is paying attention here and now,
with kindness and curiosity,
so that we can choose our behavior.

Let’s break this definition down. “Paying attention here and now” means not dwelling on the past or worrying about the future but paying attention to what’s actually happening in *this* moment. And we pay attention “with kindness and curiosity”; otherwise, we can be incredibly hard on ourselves and our athletes. We tend to only see when we, and our athletes, have “made mistakes” or “screwed up.” With mindfulness, we intentionally practice bringing an attitude of kindness and curiosity to ourselves and our experience. Finally, when we bring our kind and curious attention to our thoughts and feelings, to the sensations in our bodies, and to the people and circumstances in our lives, then we have everything we need “so that we can choose our behavior” and *respond* to challenging situations in training, competition, and daily life. Research on mindfulness and self-compassion in sports, academics, and the workplace indicates that these practices enhance the ability to learn, perform, and move toward mastery.

The same concepts, practices, reflections, and activities offered to athletes throughout this book can help *you* respond to typical coaching challenges. Specifically, they will support you as you provide your athletes with essential mental and emotional skills for training and competition; encourage athletes dealing with injuries and psychological challenges; work with

insecure and arrogant athletes; enhance team chemistry; respond to player mistakes, bad calls by officials, and tough losses; deal with shortsighted, exceedingly optimistic (deluded), and overbearing parents; and address issues with staff. These skills will allow you to create a culture that will help individual athletes and the entire team to find flow and consistently perform their best.

Pause here and simply notice your thoughts and feelings as you reread the last statement: These skills will allow you to create a culture that will help individual athletes and the entire team to find flow and consistently perform their best.

As you begin, it may inspire you to know that many elite athletes and professional teams are enthusiastically using mindfulness, specifically because they have discovered that it enhances performance and creates the conditions for finding flow. See the “Mindfulness” section in chapter 1 for an incomplete list of the ever-growing number of athletes and teams who have used, or are using, mindfulness to enhance their performance.

If you are truly committed to sharing these skills with your athletes and you haven’t read the rest of the book, I strongly encourage you to pause here and read chapter 1, “Welcome,” and, at the very least, scan the table of contents to get a feel for the powerful mental and emotional skills offered in this book. While there is no way to capture all of the specifics and refinements offered in individual chapters, I will do my best to provide you with a working foundation.

Reflection: My Coaching

As a coach committed to excellence, you spend hours thinking about and planning the *what* of your coaching—the specific skills, drills, and progressions that you offer each day and throughout the season. Mindfulness invites you to explore the *why* and *how* of your coaching. So perhaps you can pause here, breathe, and reflect on your coaching, intentions, and methods. Be brave, be willing to be *real* with yourself, be kind and curious, and then see what you discover. Sit with each of the following questions for a few minutes, letting the layers of thoughts and feelings reveal themselves.

Why do you coach?

How were you coached?

How do you feel about how you were coached?

What qualities did you most appreciate in your coaches?

How do you define success?

What are your intentions when you coach?

How do you demonstrate these intentions on a daily basis?

What do you want your athletes to learn from you as a coach?

How would your athletes describe your coaching style?

Do you have coaching habits that you would like to change?

If you are feeling reluctant to really explore these topics, perhaps this story will encourage you to dig deeper. Dave Shaw, coach of the Stanford football team, was known for his stoicism. In fact, it inspired a campus T-shirt entitled “50 Shades of Shaw,” on which “expressionless” faces of Shaw appeared above various emotions, such as excited, sad, confused, happy, and upset. During a 2014 game against UCLA, cornerback Ronnie Harris politely suggested that Shaw “loosen up.” Harris told Shaw to “let it out. When you have a sense of comfort, place that in our hearts, as well.” Harris’s heartfelt comments prompted Shaw to modify his coaching style, that day and moving forward. The changes Shaw implemented inspired his players. Blake Martinez, an inside linebacker, noted the powerful impact of Shaw’s more expressive style. “The thing I see is he gives us high-fives. We feed off that. It’s like bonus motivation” (Wilner 2015).

Activity: Intentionally Creating the Culture

Each season you have the opportunity to establish team culture. What are your intentions? For yourself? For your athletes? For the team as a whole? As noted previously, *intentions* are distinct from goals, and they define qualities of being rather than specific outcomes. When intentions are held in the context of mindfulness, they serve as a behavioral compass. Here are a couple of examples of intentions: We treat ourselves, our teammates, our coaches, our opponents, and the officials with kindness and respect. We commit to coming to practice and games physically, mentally, and emotionally ready to play.

On the first day of the season it can be a fun and valuable team-building exercise to create a list of fifteen to twenty intentions, and then choose three to five intentions from the initial list to commit to for the season. Almost any topic in this book can be made into a guiding intention. You can refine this process by reflecting on qualities, or elements, that are missing or underdeveloped on your team. Many highly respected coaches will tell you in no uncertain terms that while their less successful colleagues are often technically very skilled, they are less successful *because they fail to develop an explicit, intentional team culture*.

Steve Kerr, coach of the Golden State Warriors, is a shining example of a coach who creates an intentional team culture. As mentioned already, the team's core values are joy, mindfulness, compassion, and competition—all topics covered in depth in earlier chapters (see Luke Walton's comments in the "Compassion" section, chapter 10).

Practice: The Magic Ratio and Filling Emotional Tanks

As the story about Stanford football coach Shaw demonstrates, *you* set the tone for your athletes and your team. A few words, or simple gestures, can inspire, or devastate, an athlete or an entire team. Research by Dr. John Gottman and others (Gottman 1994; Losada 1999; Losada and Heaphy 2004), highlighted previously (see "Positive Scanning and the Magic Ratio" and "Filling Your Teammates' Emotional Tanks"), shows that one-to-one relationships and teams function best if the ratio of positive to negative interactions is at least five to one. Sir Alex Ferguson, coach of Manchester United, unequivocally states, "Few people get better with criticism; most respond to encouragement instead. So I tried to give encouragement when I could. For a player—for any human being—there is nothing better than hearing 'Well done.' Those are the two best words ever invented" (Carmichael 2015).

So, are you willing to commit to maintaining the magic five-to-one ratio and to filling the emotional tanks of your athletes and staff (see chapters 5 and 10)? Are you hesitant? Are you concerned that doing so will make your team soft? If so, consider the following appreciative reflections about Steve Kerr, coach of the Golden State Warriors, from sports writer Noah Frank and Jim Thompson, founder of the Positive Coaching Alliance. Frank writes, "That's why the process of unyielding optimism, of always building up his players for the next challenge, rather than tearing them down for any failure, remains the most important aspect of his job." Thompson elaborates, "When you've got someone like Kerr right now, showing almost relentless positivity, it's fabulous... We want [coaches] to understand that positive emotions can create an upward spiral. What builds resilience is positivity" (Frank 2016).

Even if you are having doubts, simply commit to positive scanning and filling the emotional tanks of your athletes and staff for the next few weeks, and see what happens.

- When you are positive, what is the tone of the team on the field during training, water breaks, competition?

- Do their efforts and body language change?
- Are they more willing to push, take risks, and learn from mistakes?

Let's be clear. I am not suggesting that you offer overly cheerful false praise, or that there won't be moments when what is truly needed is clear, rigorous feedback—tough love. Rather, I am saying that when your athletes and staff trust you, and their tanks are full, then when you need to offer constructive criticism they won't be in fight, flight, or freeze mode (also known as the refractory period; see chapter 6); they will be able to *hear* your suggestions and will be *motivated* to act on them.

Activity: Attending to Individual Athletes

Most coaches work with several athletes; many coaches work with an entire team of athletes. Each athlete has her own personality and physical, mental, and emotional strengths and weaknesses. Early in the season, and at least once during the season, set aside time to reflect on each of your athletes. Do your best to see each athlete with fresh eyes. Initially, it can be helpful to acknowledge the basic story you tell yourself about your point guard, and then to consider other qualities she possesses. What are her strengths and weaknesses physically, mentally, and emotionally? What style of coaching is she most responsive to? How does she feel about her performance and her role on the team? How does she get along with her teammates? Is she a leader, a follower, a loner, a disruptive force? What do you know about her life outside of basketball? How is she doing in school? How are her relationships with her family, friends, roommates, and colleagues? How does she feel about her body? What qualities do you want to nurture in her? How can you best support her development as an athlete and a human being? Now that you have held her in your kind and curious attention, how might you coach her differently? Below are some specific examples of gifted coaches who mindfully attend to their athletes and modify their coaching accordingly.

Sir Alex Ferguson, coach of Manchester United, talks about mindfully observing and looking outside his usual boxes for each athlete (see “Thinking Outside the Box” in chapter 5) to pick up crucial information:

Seeing a change in a player's habits, or a sudden dip in his enthusiasm allowed me to go further with him: Is it family problems? Is he struggling financially? Is he tired? What kind of mood is he in? Sometimes I could even tell that a player was injured when he thought he was fine. I don't think many people fully understand the value of observing. I came to see observation as a critical part of my management skills. The ability to see things is key—or, more specifically, the ability to see things you don't expect to see. (Carmichael 2015)

Coaches must be especially mindful of what individual athletes need, as well as how they respond to various coaching styles. Bill Walsh, former head coach of the San Francisco 49ers, offers an excellent example of mindfully coaching two unique quarterbacks. “Early on, we had to encourage Joe (Montana) to trust his spontaneous instincts. We were careful not to criticize him when he used his creative abilities and things did not work out. Instead, we nurtured him to use his instincts. We had to allow him to be wrong on occasion and to live with it. In the case of Steve (Young), it was almost the opposite. We had to work with him to be disciplined enough to live within the strict framework of what we were doing. Steve is a great spontaneous athlete and a terrific runner, but we found that we had to reduce the number of times he would use his instincts and increase his willingness to stay within the confines of the team concept.”

Now you can practice the skill of attending to individual athletes by completing the following worksheet for each of your athletes. (You can download additional copies of the worksheet at <http://www.newharbinger.com/40217>.) Notice if you are tempted to blow off this drill. What would you say to an athlete who wanted to skip a particular drill?

ATTENDING TO INDIVIDUAL ATHLETES

What is the basic story you tell yourself about _____ (athlete's name)?

What are this athlete's strengths and weaknesses physically, mentally, and emotionally?

What style of coaching is this athlete most responsive to?

How does this athlete feel about her or his performance and role on the team?

How well does this athlete get along with teammates?

Is this athlete a leader, a follower, a loner, or a disruptive force?

How is this athlete doing in school or at work?

How are this athlete's relationships with family, friends, roommates, or colleagues?

How does this athlete feel about his or her body?

What qualities do you want to nurture in this athlete?

How can you best support this person's development as an athlete and a human being?

Now that you have held this athlete in your kind and curious attention, how might you coach this person differently?

Reflection: Attending to the Team as a Whole

If you are coaching a team, after you have reflected upon each athlete individually, expand your attention to consider the team as a whole.

How is team morale? How is the team's energy level? If it is low, would the team benefit from a period of recovery, a more playful practice, or an increase in intensity? If it is high, is it sustainable through the season or does it need to be tempered slightly?

Watch your athletes as they arrive and depart from practice, partner for drills, recover during water breaks, hang out on the bus, and unwind at meals. What is the general tone of the team? Is the banter lighthearted and inclusive? Is there an undercurrent of tension, resentment, or cliquishness? Do players mix and match, or are there repetitive divisions?

This type of reflection is absolutely critical to getting the most out of your team. In highly competitive environments, if a culture of inclusivity and cooperation is not *actively cultivated* on a moment-to-moment basis, players often engage in an insidious and invisible form of bullying known as relational aggression or emotional bullying. Ideally, the environment on a team is one of true cooperation and compassion (operating together, sharing a passion), which brings out the best in each person. As noted on the Proactive Coaching Facebook page, "Good teams don't have an 'in group' and an 'out group.' Leadership must prevent this by developing an intentional culture and then keeping their arms around the whole team and insisting the players do as well. Everyone matters on great teams" (2015).

It is beyond heartbreaking to hear athletes as young as eight describe textbook cases of ongoing, unaddressed relational aggression on local soccer teams, and to read about the pervasive, extremely cruel culture of bullying on some NFL teams (Van Bibber 2014). Slowly, athletes, parents, and coaches are becoming aware of and addressing this epidemic that manifests itself in thousands of *almost* invisible interactions every day on fields and courts and in pools and locker rooms across the country.

Relational aggression, also known as emotional bullying, is using relationships to cause emotional pain. It is a subtle and extremely difficult-to-detect pattern of behavior directed at one or two individuals. The most common manifestations are excluding from social groups and activities, mean teasing, rumor spreading, secret divulging, alliance building, backstabbing, ignoring, verbal insulting, and using hostile body language (for example, eye rolling and smirking). Simple examples of relational aggression that may occur on teams include teammates rejecting a request to partner with or sit with a particular individual, and then happily partnering or sitting with a preferred, more popular teammate, or a teammate sharing snacks with everyone except one or two individuals. Another telltale sign of relational aggression is an athlete trying to defend or justify cruel behavior by saying, “I was just kidding. Can’t you take a joke?”

Athletes engage in relational aggression to feel better about themselves and to elevate their social status, while simultaneously diminishing the social status of the victim and isolating this person. Relational bullies are driven by jealousy, competitiveness, insecurity, and desire for approval. They engage in this type of bullying specifically because it is extremely difficult to detect and is thus likely to remain both unnoticed and unaddressed. Athletes who *appear* the most innocent may be the most cruel. These bullies are often popular, charismatic “leaders” who are well liked by adults (Yoon, Barton, and Taiariol 2004).

Emotional bullying has a significant negative impact on each athlete and the team as a whole. Obviously the victims suffer. What is less obvious, however, is that the bystanders and bullies also suffer. Bystanders live in fear that they will be the next to be bullied, and they feel conflicted because they are unsure how to intervene. Bullies suffer because they know in their hearts that their behavior is unkind and destructive.

It is important to understand that the impulse beneath bullying is most often deep-seated insecurity. As a coach, it is *your* responsibility to coach constructively (so that your athletes feel good about themselves and don’t need to build themselves up by bullying others), to create an inclusive team culture, and to set clear expectations about how you want your athletes to treat each other on and off the court or playing field. There are two reasons why it is crucial that you coach in this manner. First, it is the right thing to do. Second, individual athletes and the entire team will perform better if every athlete feels safe, respected, included, and cared for by you and his or her teammates. The necessity of this type of atmosphere is summed up by Phil Jackson, champion NBA basketball player and coach, who writes, “It takes a number of critical factors to win an NBA championship, including the right mix of talent, creativity,

intelligence, toughness, and of course, luck. But if a team doesn't have the most essential ingredient—love—none of those other factors matter" (2014, 4).

When you look through the lens of relational aggression, or emotional bullying, do you have any concerns about your team? Have you seen *any* red-flag behaviors?

If you have seen *anything*, even "little" signs, something that you might be tempted to write off as an isolated incident or as no big deal, continue observing. Bullies are sneaky, and unless you are paying extremely close attention, their actions will be undetectable and invisible. What you see is always the snowflake on the tip of the iceberg.

One way to assess whether relational bullying is an issue on your team is to have your players *anonymously* complete the "if you spot it, you got it" practice in chapter 10. Additionally, basic athlete, coach, and parent agreements are provided with the online resources (visit <http://www.newharbinger.com/40217>). I drafted these agreements while creating team-building and antibullying workshops for the Positive Coaching Alliance. You can adapt the agreements to your own coaching style and circumstances.

Practice: Three Questions to Build Connection

Even if you think your team's relationships are in great shape, on a lighter practice day it can be extremely beneficial to have your athletes play the game of three questions. To begin, have them make two lines facing each other and pair off. Invite them to close their eyes and rest in stillness and quietness. Then, offer the following instructions:

Okay, for this drill, the players with their back to the goal are going to be the speakers, and the players facing the goal are going to be the listeners. I am going to read three questions. After each question the speaker is going to respond. And the listener is going to...? Yep, just listen. Listen from the heart, and notice any thoughts or feelings that arise while the speaker is responding. After the speaker has answered all three questions, we will switch, and repeat the process with the listener becoming the speaker. The intention of this practice is to support you in becoming a more cohesive, effective team. The more real you are willing to be with each other, the more likely that is to happen. So be brave, and be honest.

Allow at least one to two minutes for the speaker to respond to each of the following questions:

What do we have in common?

What do you appreciate about me?

What do you want me to know?

Depending on how brave and real you want your players to be, you can encourage them to be a bit more vulnerable, modifying the last question to suit your circumstances:

What do you want me to know about you?

What do you want me to know about how we can best work together?

What do you want me to know about myself as a teammate?

After the first person has responded, repeat the process for the second person. Once each person in the first pairing has responded to the questions, have all the players pause, close their eyes, breathe, reset, then shuffle one player to the right. Repeat the process until each player has answered the three questions with each teammate. To close, again have them pause, breathe, and open their hearts, a bit more, to each player on the team. It is only when athletes know and trust each other that they are able to perform at their best, especially in decisive situations. Theo Epstein, president of the Chicago Cubs, believes trust, vulnerability, and connection allowed his team to win the 2016 World Series:

We were winners that night in Cleveland because when things went really, really wrong—and then the rains came—our players already knew each other so well that they could come together; they already trusted each other so much that they could open up and be vulnerable, and they were already so connected that they could lift one another up. We had already won. (*Time Staff* 2017)

Practice: Responding Rather Than Reacting

The early chapters of this book are devoted to supporting athletes in building the skills to respond (pause and choose their behavior) rather than react (act immediately out of upset and habit) in challenging situations. As a coach, you can use these same skills to respond to the unique difficulties that arise during the season—responding to players' mistakes, officials' bad calls, tough losses, and conflicts within the team, with parents, and with your staff. Charles R. Swindoll, pastor, author, and educator, writes that “life is 10 percent of what happens to me and 90 percent of how I react (or respond) to it.” Again, I strongly encourage you to read the early sections of this book, so that you can learn the fundamentals of responding and *then* share them with your athletes.

Here's an example of two coaches behaving differently when their kickers missed field goals in the same NFL game. On October 23, 2016, the Arizona Cardinals and Seattle Seahawks game ended in a 6–6 tie. During the game, kickers Chandler Catanzaro (Cardinals) and Stephen Hauschka (Seahawks) each missed makeable field goals. During the postgame press conference, when asked about the missed field goal, Cardinals head coach Bruce Arians responded, “Make it. This is professional, this ain't high school, baby. You get paid to make it.”

Seahawks coach Pete Carroll had a different take on his kicker's miss, saying that Hauschka "made his kicks to give us a chance and unfortunately he didn't make the last one. He's been making kicks for years around here...but he's gonna hit a lot of winners as we go down the road here. I love him and he's our guy" (Bariso 2016).

Which coach reacted?

Which coach responded?

Which coach publicly promotes mindfulness?

Which kicker is most likely to be in flow and perform optimally the next time out?

Remember that how *you* respond teaches your athletes how to respond to mistakes, injuries, and other difficulties. Practice responding like Pete Carroll did, with acceptance, composure, and confidence, and your athletes will do the same.

Activity: Mindful Communication

As many of the wise coaches quoted in this chapter have indicated, ultimately coaching is about relationships, and relationships are built one communication at a time. Because relationships involve people and their thoughts, feelings, stories, fears, and desires, difficult communications are inevitable. Knowing this, you can minimize difficulties by practicing mindful communication and by encouraging your players, staff, and parents to do the same. (See "Mindful Communication" in chapter 10 for a detailed explanation of this practice.)

In short, mindful communication means that in challenging situations, when things get messy, you take some time to breathe and allow your thoughts (see chapter 5), feelings (see chapter 6), stories, fears, and desires to arise and fall away, and *then* you *choose* your words wisely.

Can you wait until the waves of frustration (see chapters 6 and 10)—yours and your athletes'—have subsided, and then ask yourself the following?

- Is your athlete (or team members) in a place where he (or they) can really hear you?
- What is your intention for the conversation?
- What do you want the athlete or team to learn?
- *How* do you want to convey your message?
- Are there *specific* physical or tactical qualities—speed, conditioning, dribbling, passing, shooting, positioning and movement, offensive skills (one-on-one or combination), defensive stance, reading the game—that the player or team needs to develop?
- What habits of excellence are missing?

The most difficult conversation is often the one when you have to tell a player that he is not performing—physically, mentally, emotionally, or in relation to teammates or coaching staff—at the level needed. Although these conversations can be tough, if they are done with intention, clarity, and compassion they can provide athletes with a crucial almost moment (see chapter 11), which requires them to choose whether and how they wish to move forward.

What follows is a description of a difficult conversation that Chris Petrucelli, the US Women's National Under-21 soccer coach, had with Carli Lloyd in 2003. He had to inform Lloyd that she was being cut from the team:

I remember saying to her, “You’re really talented, but there are holes in your game that need to be fixed if you’re going to be a national team player... At this point, you’re not ready, but here are some things you have to do.”

This is where Lloyd was supposed to react [or rather respond] and prove Petrucelli wrong. That would come later. Much later. (Carlisle 2015)

As you probably know, this wasn't the end of the story for Carli. Eventually she came to understand that this conversation was a pivotal almost moment (chapter 11) in her development as a player, and that the conversation happened for her, not to her (see “It Is Happening for Me, Not to Me,” chapter 8). Reflecting on having been cut, she said, “It was the first time a coach gave me some tough love, and I needed it” (Carlisle 2015). In 2015, after more than a decade of extremely disciplined work she scored three beautiful goals in the World Cup final and was named FIFA Player of the Year.

Basic Concept: Player-to-Player Communication

Have you explicitly discussed with your players how you want them to communicate with each other? During competition? Outside the competitive arena? When things are going well? When they are having difficulties? Are you encouraging them to use the magic ratio (chapter 5) and to fill emotional tanks (chapter 10)? Have you experimented with running a practice in silence so they can read the game and communicate nonverbally? Have you run drills in which each player must say something positive before passing the ball or the puck?

Take a moment and consider the specifics of constructive team communication during competition.

Effective communication in the heat of the moment is PDQ:

- Positive: The player (or coach) giving instructions says what he wants his teammate to do (“Cut off the angle”), rather than what he doesn't want him to do (“Don't get beat”).
- Direct: The instructions are clear and specific (“diagonal run”), rather than vague (“Go!”).

- Quick: The instructions are quick and easy to understand.

More complex issues are best addressed off the field using the mindful communication practice in chapter 10.

Giving Your Team the Gift of Mindfulness

If you set clear intentions; establish an inclusive and cooperative environment; train your athletes' minds and hearts as well as their bodies; maintain the magic five-to-one ratio and fill your athletes' emotional tanks; support them in dealing with mistakes, challenges, setbacks, and injuries; respond rather than react; communicate mindfully; and cultivate habits of excellence and a love of the game, then your athletes will perform at their best, whether they are third-graders or Olympians.