

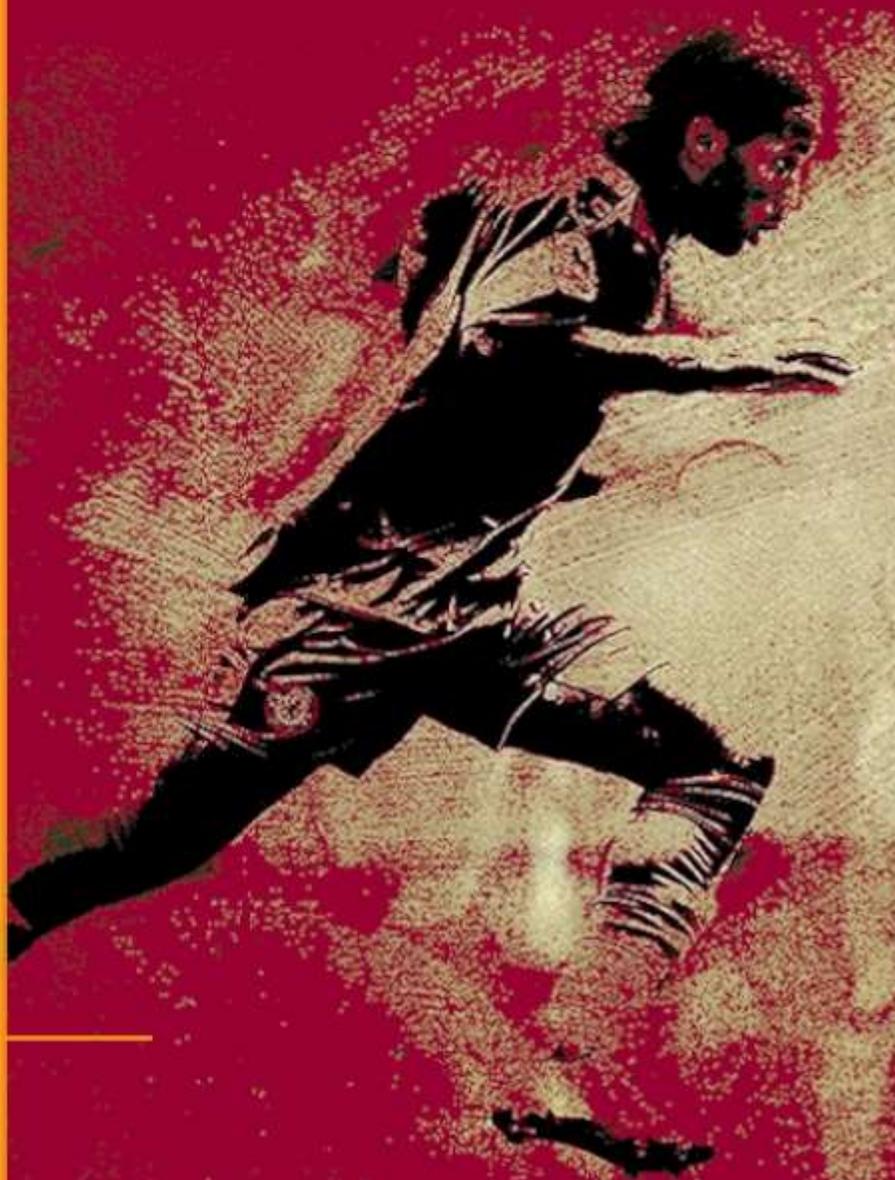
BOOK
EXCERPT

THE CHAMPION ATHLETE SERIES

Building
Champions
by Defeating
Perfectionism

JOHN ELLSWORTH, MA

GETTING IT RIGHT!



Part One

***Our Obsession
With Being
Perfect***



Excerpt from the book, Getting it Right by John Ellsworth

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Part I

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO PERFECTIONISM

“Successful competitors want to win. Head cases want to win at all costs.”

Nancy Lopez

Perfectionism is perhaps the most difficult mental obstacle for many athletes. This is largely because they often believe the strong emotional and physical ties to their sport are healthy ones, especially if they focus on improving performance.

By their very nature, athletes train for perfection and are driven to achieve and win. That desire automatically places additional pressure on athletes to consistently perform well. As a result, athletes who want to compete at the highest levels, train harder, focus on refining skills, and believe that their competitors are doing the same.

While a strong training ethic, determination, and dedication are all very much desired traits, the perfectionist athlete overestimates the value of his perfectionist tendencies and in doing so becomes trapped by the illusion of perfection. Instead of freeing himself by simply releasing the thoughts, attitudes, and beliefs that make him fear failure he becomes a slave to his sport. He simply doesn't recognize that he is actually hurting himself because he is setting himself up for a no-win situation with his all-or-nothing thinking.

For the perfectionist athlete, the relentless quest to have the ultimate performance, the fear of failure, and negative self-talk overpower the athlete's rational approach to enhance his skill mastery, and, as a result, his performance suffers. Perfectionist traits then create a mythic existence because the athlete is torn between working to be the best and the inability to reach a higher level of peak performance excellence.

Because perfectionist athletes are often unable to make the transition from practice to competition, they rarely see improvement in competition despite practicing longer and harder than other athletes. Within the confines of the controlled practice environment, perfectionist athletes are model athletes with superior physical skills and picture-perfect execution. They believe that perfect technical skill execution will result in perfect play. Unfortunately, perfect execution is always a moving target that is rarely achieved.

Place them in a stress-packed, uncontrolled competitive situation, and perfectionist athletes become overburdened with unhealthy thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes. Instead of the confident, controlled, and focused athlete who performs well in practice, the perfectionist athlete places unrealistic expectations on his performance; questions his abilities; worries about what others may be thinking about him; fixates on errors; and fears making mistakes. The end result is always the same – the perfectionist athlete simply can't take his performances to the next expected level.

The cycle continues because the perfectionist athlete believes that the harder he trains, the more successful he will be. The excessive need to control execution and the constant perception of his inept ability to perform at an expected level of performance will lead this athlete to fear failing. Sadly, he will repeatedly be defeated in competition due to his created self-fulfilling prophecy of expected failure. To avoid being embarrassed or feeling like a failure in front of others the perfectionist will invest more and more time to train without a plan designed for incremental task success. Rather than practice to perfect skills for improved competitive performance the perfectionist practices to be perfect in a controlled environment and hopes that perfect skill execution will show up in competition.

Perfectionism—Defined

So, what exactly is perfectionism? The Random House Dictionary defines perfectionism as: "...a personal standard, attitude, or philosophy that demands perfection and rejects anything less." In the world of sport psychology, perfectionism is defined as:

- 1) An intense fear of failure.
- 2) A strong desire to "look good" or execute with textbook perfect precision.
- 3) An inability to differentiate between striving for excellence vs. striving for perfection.
- 4) An all-or-nothing mentality – either the performance is good or it is bad with no middle ground.
- 5) A belief that self-worth is contingent upon performance in sports.
- 6) Placing high expectations on self and internalizes expectations from others.
- 7) Caring too much about what others think.
- 8) Playing with too much tension, stress, anxiety, nervousness that reduces the ability to play relaxed and free, and limits the ultimate goal which is "to have fun."
- 9) A fear of being embarrassed.
- 10) A fear of being judged by others in a social context.
11. Analyzing technique and mechanics even during competition.
12. Playing to avoid a loss or mistakes versus playing to win.
13. A reluctance to try new ideas because a perfect performance is not possible during the learning process.

Perfectionism stems from an athlete's beliefs and thoughts that he is somehow "flawed" and, therefore, he must try harder because he can never be good enough. Some experts relate to perfectionism as a lack of confidence in one's abilities combined with a fear of failure.

Learned Behavior

As we mature we learn from our parents, teachers, coaches, and teammates about what society believes is acceptable behavior. For example, most children are taught that it isn't polite to speak with a mouth full of food or it is unacceptable to fight with others. These learned lessons are healthy so long as they are taught with constraint and allow for flexibility.

We also learn that success in life is very important. Academic success early in life will facilitate acceptance to a college or university of choice, as well as securing a scholarship to help pay for the increasing financial demands of a higher education. In the pursuit of success young adults learn that it is not acceptable to fail; therefore, more often than not, there is no middle ground between success and failure.

Parents, coaches, and teachers want the best for children, athletes, and students. As a result, we teach them a multitude of strategies and tactics to achieve success and be winners. As adults we have learned that success requires a strong competitive spirit. Unfortunately, we often forget to teach that success is not always about winning, achieving, or being the best at something. What happened to the joy and the rewards that come from experiencing the intrinsic value of sport participation and competition? In the real world, there are rewards that far surpass winning such as knowing how to work with others effectively; being a team player, overcoming adversity; and finding a solution that's a win-win for everyone.

The more often athletes are unable to decipher that there is a clear line between "seeking out success" and "demanding success or perfection," the less likely they will achieve consistent and incremental higher levels of performance success and joy in sport participation.

Case Studies:

Robert (Basketball):

Robert would not take a chance at taking “the last shot” of the game for fear of failure. As a result he would play tentatively in a “comfort zone” only executing where he felt competent and comfortable. Robert would rather not have success if there was a chance that he would fail. This type of thought process kept him from taking chances. Without taking chances Robert automatically reduced his chances for success. Not until Robert learned that he was his own worse critic, did he begin to take a different approach to practice and play. Once Robert realized that he could be his own best supporter and that no one else outside of him had any control over his performance, he began to take chances and, as a result, improved his success.

“You don’t want to eliminate the little voice... the goal is to manage it.”

Blair Singer

Elizabeth (Cross Country):

Elizabeth would not compete at anything unless she was reasonably assured she would be a winner. She was so competitive that if she did not take first place in all of her races she would repeatedly abuse herself verbally, or not compete at all. This attitude would last for days after the competition. That type of behavior also kept her from experiencing new things with her friends because she would be embarrassed if she could not perform the new skill perfectly.

“It’s always better to focus now and not about what’s going to happen later.”

Nancy Riedel – Cross Country Coach at Mira Costa College

Mike (Baseball):

Mike was a very good baseball player, but simply could not let mistakes go. He dwelled on past mistakes which created a belief system that was based on generalizations. If Mike failed at something two or more times, he would assume he wasn't capable of performing the skill. As a result, he would invest hours and hours practicing and trying to perfect the skill with little or no focus on a corrective action plan. For Mike, time and practice was the cure, but it rarely was. Without a practice plan that was based on breaking down skills into executable parts with associated reasonable and achievable performance objectives, Mike continued to remain stuck in the quicksand of perfectionism.

My motto was always to keep swinging. Whether I was in a slump or feeling badly, the only thing to do is was keep swinging.”

Hank Aaron

David (Softball):

David was always worried about the “others” in his world. If the coaches, teammates, parents, and scouts were not seeing him perform perfectly, then he was a failure. During games David was constantly looking to the dugout for support from the coach rather than focusing on the things he had in his control. He was more worried about the things out of his control; consequently, his performance suffered because his focus was not on his controllable execution. When David learned that his performance was purely about his own attitude, behavior, focus, and execution and everything else was secondary, he started to perform exceptionally well. He developed an execution plan based on a set of variables that he could control.

Corey (Hockey):

Corey is a great hockey player and the fastest skater on his team at age 14. He was afraid to make mistakes so he would not go out of his way to take chances for fear of embarrassment and ridicule from his team mates. The safest thing for him was to blend in with the boards in hopes that he would be invisible. If he could not be successful and execute with total precision he would not make the extra effort. This type of behavior was noticeable to the coach and consequently Corey would spend more time on the bench rather than in the game. Corey

soon began to realize that mistakes were a natural part of performance growth and success. As part of his new approach to hockey he made a commitment to become more visible, get more involved in the action, worry less about what others thought because others thoughts had no bearing on his performance. An allowance for mistakes without self ridicule became an important part of his new approach to the game. When he began to believe and trust in his strengths his performance progress ramped up significantly. The performance success had improved so much that he became an important asset to the team's and eventually achieved runner up honors at the National Championship.

“Experience tells you what do; confidence tells you to do it.”

Stan Smith

Matthew (Golf):

As a division II college golfer Matt expected every shot had to be executed perfectly. There was no room for error. One or two errors sent his game into a downward spiral. Mental flexibility was his major challenge. He was so hard on himself that he self sabotaged after a small number of errors because he was sure he would not be able to perform up to his and others expectations. The lack of success most always had to do with course conditions, weather, or something to do with one of his clubs. He finally realized the difference between shooting an 81 and a 75 was solely connected to his mental approach to the game and the pressure he placed on himself to meet a specific expectation. Upon finally accepting and understanding that his approach to the game was his major nemesis he started to approach the game with less demands and pressure. The implementation of this strategy alone helped him reduce his score from shooting in the low 80's to consistently shooting in the mid 70's.

You've got to think you can win, no matter what age you are.”

Arnold Palmer

Kelly (Gymnastics):

Performance was seen in black and white terms. It was either good or bad with no room for in between success. She also felt like she had no voice to speak up about her physical condition (pain) or fear. Her lack of voice kept her locked in a constant struggle between lack of freedom and enjoyment. For her it was simply “the coach is always right” and I must follow everything the coach says. When she feared executing a specific skill she would revolt by making excuses or complaining that she could not focus. When asked to explain what was getting in the way of her execution she would say, “I don’t know.” When in reality the only thing she didn’t want to do was fail and look bad. So, rather than try and fail she took the stance that if I stall I will run out of time and not have to execute the skill. After working through her belief that he didn’t have a voice she finally admitted with great emotion that she disliked the event and avoided it at all costs. Her success came as a result of first believing she had a voice and secondly hearing from her coach that she had permission to fail as often as she wanted.

***“No matter how big your goals...there are going to be times
when you miss a little bit.”***

Shannon Miller – Olympic Gymnast

Common symptoms of perfectionism

Since perfection is often masked by the good intentions of a dedicated athlete, the symptoms of perfectionism traits are difficult to uncover. The athlete wishing to know more about the impact of perfectionism on performance may benefit from professional help to uncover the recognizable symptoms of perfectionism. The following list of symptoms best describes the most common symptoms of a perfectionist:

1) Sets standards that are beyond reach or reason.

For example: (Golf)

An athlete may decide that in order to win, she must perform without mistakes or errors.

TIP: Play with a “present tense” mind set with focus on the immediate task at hand, and let go of the past and future.

2) Is never satisfied by anything less than perfection.

For example: (Tennis)

An athlete placing third in a state championship may feel he failed in the competition because he didn't win it.

TIP: Set performance process goals without an end result or outcome focus for performance.

3) Becomes depressed when he/she experiences failure/disappointment.

For example: (Baseball/Softball)

An athlete, who strikes out, goes back to the dug out and sulks, or indulges in silent negative self-talk and does not let it go. The feelings carry over to the next day, and on to the next game

TIP: Create positive self-talk and high confidence belief statements that focus on success and reframe negative thought patterns.

Example: “Striking out is part of the game; let it go and attack the ball with focused intensity.”

4) Is preoccupied with fear of failure and disapproval which often depletes motivation/energy levels.

For example: (Basketball)

An athlete worries so much about what his coach or teammates may think of his performance that he is unable to make the free throw. “I can’t miss this shot because if I do I will have let the team down.”

TIP: Set achievable objectives (process goals) that are designed for success and reward success as often as possible.

5) Sees mistakes as evidence of unworthiness.

For example:

An athlete perceives that she is a bad person unless she performs well. This can happen if the pressure to show results is very high. Approval by others is extremely important for this athlete.

TIP: Teach that sport participation is only one small aspect of who we are as human beings.

6) Uses all or nothing thinking. There is only black and white no in between.

For example: (Basketball)

An athlete believes that if he misses a few shot attempts, he will lose the tournament. “I have not been able to make this type of shot in the past three games and I am not sure I can make it this time.”

TIP: Keep Shooting! “You miss 100% of the shots you don’t take – every time.” Achievement is not about success or failure, but about the will to keep on trying to achieve reasonable goals that are designed for success.

7) Agonizes over small, non-critical details, such as executing the perfect stroke, swing, shot, jump, landing, etc.

For example: (Gymnastics)

An athlete focuses on how her feet must be placed to consider a perfect dismount and stick the landing. Technique is very important especially in gymnastics. However, the focus is much better placed on the mental aspects of confidence, trust, and execution. Focus on the subconscious rather than on conscious thought will elicit better performance results.

TIP: Train the mind to “speak” positively by using words and phrases that reinforce confidence, trust, execution, and appreciation.

8) Is easily distracted—can't focus on the task and allows anxiety, fear, and thoughts to distract from execution of the skill "in the moment."

For example:

An athlete, who is filled with anxiety and fear because he struck out the last time he was at bat against the same pitcher. Anxiety and fear come from the athlete's lack of confidence and trust in skill execution. In these situations, the athlete can incorporate two strategies: 1) learn how to reduce the anxiety, and stress by using specific breathing techniques such as centering, 2) learn more about executing in the present and how past and future focus detracts from “central” focus on present tense skill execution.

TIP: Practice to master breath control to calm and relax before skill execution. Breathing will be your silent partner if you practice. This is done by using “centering” and using “exaggerated deep breathing” sometimes called diaphragmatic breathing. (*Script Appendix A*)

9) Avoids new challenges – doesn't want to advance to next level (e.g. from junior to senior role in sports), doesn't want to try new techniques or learn new routines, etc.

For example:

An athlete is reluctant to learn a new skating routine because it will incorporate new jumps that she has not performed before. Athletes like to be the best at their skill. When athletes develop a fear of failing, they may want to remain in a place of “comfort” because they have had success in this place. This “comfort zone” mentality keeps them stuck and unable to learn new skills.

TIP: Develop a personal practice plan that incorporates learning at least one new skill per week and incorporates “task relevant cues” to break down the skills into small components. This approach will reinforce greater incremental success points and, therefore, build confidence.

10) Rarely enjoys accomplishments - can't feel satisfied, proud, or a sense of completion.

For example: (Fencing)

An athlete who places second in a highly competitive tournament doesn't feel a sense of satisfaction for doing well. High expectations are the cause of this thought process. Relishing in the positive aspects of success is often foreign to perfectionists because they are focused on the carrot they did not get versus the success they achieved. For this reason, it is important for athletes to set achievable/stretch performance goals. Success breeds confidence, joy, and trust. Why not enjoy the sweetness of success rather than the bitter taste of self-defeat?

TIP: Replace expectations with written, observable, measurable, and achievable *performance objectives*. The same would apply to establishing a set of *mental game objectives*.

Example – Performance Objective:

Golf: Hit 10 fairways in a round, or pick a specific target before every shot.

Baseball: Increase my strikes to total pitch ratio from 50 to 60%.

Gymnastics: Be successful on three out of five double back flips on beam.

Example – Mental Game Objective:

Gymnastics: Be confident in your dismount on beam, or mentally rehearse the vault prior to the start of the run.

Football: Commit to the play called, by mentally rehearsing my position assignment.

Triathlete: Commit to the race plan, and when distracted be aware, and refocus on the task at hand.

II) Looks at flaws, dislikes the process of play, is focused on results, and is self critical.

For example: (Golf)

An athlete is frustrated with waiting her turn in a golf tournament, and while waiting, lets her mind wander and nit-picks her previous shot. This athlete is definitely not process focused. She is stuck on what she did not do versus letting go of the uncontrollable past and focusing on the controllable execution of the present.

TIP: Incorporating a “process focus” training mind set will help to occupy the mind with thoughts, feelings, and positive words that reinforce previous success.

I2) Compares themselves to others – becomes more critical of others.

For example:

An athlete, who looks at other, more accomplished athletes, and gauges his performance on the other athlete's abilities. If I constantly compare myself to another athlete I never allow myself to compete on my own level using my own skills. In essence I discount the strengths I have because I look at the strengths others have and focus on my own weaknesses in comparison to their strengths. Alternatively, inventory your skill sets and rank your skills from 1-10. Incorporate the 60-40 concept which directs one to focus on and trust the 60% of 100% of your skills you do exceptionally well, and let the other 40% go until you have improved and then mastered one or more tasks that make up the weaker 40%. You will be amazed at the results that will come forward if you simply trust the 60% you do well. This thought process changes the entire dynamic and shifts the focus on others back to a trust in self.

TIP: Success is an individual experience. The athlete's success has little to do with experiences, capabilities, thoughts, or comments of others. Success is "task" specific and everyone has unique abilities to apply to skill mastery. Reinforcing individual strengths and how the strengths differentiate and make the athlete unique is important to individuation.

I3) Must compete and win at all costs. While the "must compete" to the best of my ability part is good, the "win at all costs" part is not. Winning is not the most important thing – competing is. The four aspects of the game that you have in your control (attitude, behavior, appreciation, and skill execution) are the things that matter most. All too often the focus is on the end result of winning. The end result does not matter if the athlete plays to an alternative "performance objective" or a "mental goal" to remain focused in the moment and on the process of play. If we play in the moment, we control the things that will make the difference in the end. It's not about the outcome but more about the joy of having fun.

TIP: The end result or outcome of a competitive event is inevitable. The objective for the athlete is to remain connected to the “present” and the “process” of play in a “moment to moment” thought process mentality. The only things the athlete can control in a competitive environment relate to: attitude, behavior, and trust in skill execution learned from practice.

The Cost of Perfectionism

Research tells us that perfectionist traits take a great toll on athletes. In addition to the substantial stress perfectionism tendencies create, the need to be perfect also has additional costs. Some common negative payoffs of perfectionism include:

1. You feel that your accomplishments are never good enough.
2. You value people (or yourself) based upon your accomplishments.
3. You believe that your best isn't good enough.
4. You take mistakes personally and are reluctant to keep trying.
5. You are vulnerable to rejection (or feel rejected).
6. You focus on what you think you should do instead of what you want to do.
7. You set impossible expectations on performance or hard-to-reach goals.
8. You expect perfection of others (and yourself).
9. You feel you never quite measure up.
10. You become critical of others (or yourself).
11. You become anxious in competitive situations, especially during "crunch-time."

Assess Your Attitude about Performance

Today's Mental Game Check

1. I become so centered on being perfect that I lose sight of the real goal which is to perform with confidence and enjoy the competition.
3. I want to execute so perfectly that if I make any mistakes, I become unglued, frustrated and see myself failing.
4. I am practicing all the time because I want to be successful, but usually under-perform, or execute poorly in competition.

Identify your Top 6 Traits related to Perfectionism:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____

“Be motivated by your desire to achieve rather than your fear of failure.”

- Gary Mac