

DEFYING DEFEAT

The cliché "It's not whether you win or lose, but how you play the game" may have some real value, but nothing hurts like the pain of defeat and it's the fear of defeat that motivates many towards victory. With the NRL finals shortly upon us, all sportspeople, including league players, have suffered the agony of loss, but it's the psychological battle post contest that may impact most on a defeated athlete the next time he or she walks on the playing field. This month *The Coaches' Edge* focuses on defying defeat and speaks to Steven Folkes, the Coach of the NRL team, The Bulldogs, on preparing for the next game in the wake of defeat.

Everybody has heard players stating that defeat in a previous encounter was motivation enough to go out and win. Is this necessarily the right motivation to be taking into competition?

It varies from individual to individual and from club to club, but I guess whatever an individual finds motivating is good enough. It can definitely be one element, but I wouldn't hang my hat on it as a coach. If you have a defeat it all depends on the reasons. If they played poorly and weren't motivated and weren't committed then perhaps that's certainly worth mentioning. It's more about their own performance and lifting the standard of that.

Does the preparation for the next game differ when coming off a loss?

No, I don't think so, not greatly. Obviously, winning is what it's all about, so as a team you become more focused to win and maybe that's not a good thing. You should probably be more focused on the processes of getting the two points rather than the actual win itself. But different situations call for different approaches, if you've lost five in a row, obviously winning the next game is going to be fairly important to you as player and as a team.

What tips or suggestions would you have for coaches and players coming off a loss?

Your players lost because they didn't do certain things as well as the opposition. They really need to get those processes right, and hopefully if they do all that right, the outcome will look after itself.

Folkes raises the issue of getting the "processes" right. Skills training and fitness training are important but in game conditions the effects of poor nutrition and dehydration can affect mental and physical fitness. Choices made in a game can be severely affected if the body is under stress. In tight games, one bad decision by each player from being unfocussed and lacking concentration can lead to defeat. Fueling the body before and during a game will starve off physical and mental fatigue - helping the mind stay fresh and alert, keeping eyes peeled for opportunities for success - helping the body maintain peak performance for longer, taking those opportunities and turning them into success. Fueling the body after a game will also ensure faster recovery for the next round.

If an individual player in a team sport makes an error that cost's the team victory, what does a coach say?

I think you have to make sure they understand the reasons behind the error. If players start to dwell on mistakes, then obviously they will continue to make similar sorts of errors. Understanding why they did it, what they should have done and why they didn't do it is key to getting over mistakes and trying to learn from them. That's something I certainly learnt as a player.

When mistakes are made by players early on in the season there are many chances to make up for their follies. Swallowing the defeat, going back and working through the team's errors and seeing where it all went wrong is essential. But what about major defeats in finals or grand finals, where a loss can have a long lasting psychological effect on a player or team? Running through the mistakes and failed techniques over the off-season will do nothing for the players' troubled psyche. The off-season should be a time for relaxation and recovery and a renewed vigour to work better and harder in the coming season.

Sports psychology is an important asset for coaches. When Steven Folkes played rugby league, sports psychologists weren't used regularly. He remembers that there were certainly a few around, but he realises that sports psychology has become far more of a science and that increasingly it is the role of the sports psychologist and the coach to help athletes rationalise and cope with a major defeat.

The mistakes that lead to defeat may well be borne from anxiety and an inability to deal with intense pressure that team sports can bring. One theory (1) suggests that an athlete with a strong self-esteem will always cope better with defeat and that this strong self esteem makes the player less likely to crumble in the face of extreme pressure.

If uncharacteristic mistakes begin to regularly occur for a player under pressure, and skills, fitness, nutrition and hydration issues can be discounted, sessions with a sports psychologist may be valuable in revealing an underlying anxiety. With time, the problem can be treated, fortifying the athletes with skills to fight against future attacks. If it's revealed that the athlete's poor performance is more psychological than physical, a sport psychologist can assist the athlete in rationalising the loss and work with the athlete to resolve the issues that prevent peak performance.

Indeed, it could be the case that sports psychology may well be helping to reinforce the resolve of today's sportspeople who, if left unassisted, may well have fallen to pieces in the heat of competition and would never have reached the highs enjoyed by champion athletes.

Practical Tips

- After a loss, don't leave it too long before addressing the team's disappointment.
- Encourage team players to find and implement solutions together to improve morale and focus on what they can achieve and do better rather than what they did wrong.
- If an individual player is at fault, find a time to take them aside to discuss the issues privately and determine solutions and a strategy to implement these goals.

- Consider the player's/ team's fitness and skills training regime and review their nutrition and hydration strategies before, during and after training and competition.
- Determine if sessions with a sports psychologist will help and make the referral personally.
- Take a good look at your own attitude as a coach - help your players rise to the occasion to achieve both personal and team success and you too will feel the satisfaction that success brings.