

12 Key Questions for Young Athletes

by
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1. Are you enjoying the process of sport or are you worrying about the outcomes?

Young and elite athletes who enjoy the process of sport have a big advantage over those worrying about outcomes. It's impossible to fully focus on the process of performing well, if one is worrying about outcomes. Motivation from within (intrinsic motivation) is much more suited to excellence and enjoyment than motivation for outcomes. Enjoying sport for its own sake is much more likely to produce excellence and enjoyment than extrinsic motivation. Advantages of intrinsic motivation include:

- Better focus on task
- Less tension/pressure
- Better images/thoughts
- Less fluctuation in motivation

Remember why you started sport. In all likelihood, it was because it was fun and you enjoyed the process. If you maintain this focus, you are much more likely to continue until you get good. They say it takes up to 10,000 hours of practice to become an expert. More importantly you will perform better and have more fun.

The best athletes focus on the process and let the results take care of themselves. Prior to the gold medal game at the 2002 Olympics and 2004 World Cup of Hockey, Wayne Gretzky reminded Canada's players "to enjoy the process". Many of the top World Cup skiers are so focused on the process that they don't even check results until they have rehearsed an even better run in those circumstances in their mind. Now that's focusing on excellence & the process. For enjoyment & performance, adjust your motivation intrinsically.

2. Are you striving to succeed or to avoid failure?

Most of us perform far better when our orientation is want to vs. have to. If we have a game plan, we are less prone to fear of failure. Trying to avoid failure is loaded with difficulties:

- Negative images
- Tension/fear
- Less effective focus
- Possible negative fulfilling prophecy

Try golfing to avoid failure. Whatever you do, don't hit the ball in the water. We all know what is likely to happen with that outlook. Approaching success is much more effective than trying to avoid failure. Deal with your fears early by preparing your responses and game plan. Then you can enjoy the challenges of competition. A Chinese proverb suggests that CHALLENGE = OPPORTUNITY. It's a great way to look at things to avoid failure tendency.

It will keep us busy with the process rather than becoming fearful of outcomes.

3. Does being the underdog, a contender, or the favourite make a difference?

In theory, if we stay focused on the process it shouldn't make a big difference if we are considered underdog, contender or favourite. However, because we are human, it is easy for these perceptions to start influencing our perspective. The underdog has nothing to lose, so they are less prone to fear-of-failure. Their main task is just to believe they are capable.

When one becomes a contender, it is easy to begin to feel pressure from yourself and those around you. Ironically, feelings of pressure can often increase when you experience temporary success in competition. Our fear of not being able to continue at that level can often trigger an avoid failure response (tension, too conservative, poor focus) due to outcome concerns. Being emotionally ready for temporary swings in scores can help prevent this problem.

Being the favourite is the toughest. Expectations to succeed can often trigger irrational feelings of pressure. Smart performers realize that there are always process things to be working on. Speed Skaters like Catriona Lemay-Doan and Jeremy Wotherspoon are always focused on improving their race plan and execution, despite usually being considered the favourite. This has helped them maintain an effective focus and keep getting better.

One of the best responses to pressure came from former NBA star Magic Johnson. His comment was "What pressure, I'm glad they are interested". He's right - pressure is a perception - and if you have a great perspective, it doesn't have to be an issue. Enjoy sport, enjoy opportunities and challenges and it won't matter whether you are underdog, contender, or favourite.

4. Do you rehearse strategies, execution, & feelings for every competition?

Every good performer spends some time mentally and emotionally rehearsing their game plan. Mental rehearsal prepares our body for action and produces a feeling of readiness and confidence. It's not possible to rehearse everything that will happen in competition but it's extremely valuable to rehearse the main elements of one's game plan.

It's a good idea to do your rehearsal early on competition day, so you can enjoy the countdown. Rehearsing early, while your mind is clear, often has the most powerful effect. Occasional spontaneous rehearsal often happens but 10-20 minutes of quality preparation can often help you feel ready and help you enjoy the countdown to competition.

The main part of preparation is usually going over one's strategies and execution in different situations. Focus on your performance rather than spending too much time on your opponents. Also rehearse responses to some of the feelings you may have in competition. Fear, anger, guilt, embarrassment, surprise, happiness and sadness are common emotional feelings in sport. Rehearsing a response to things that will trigger them is a form of emotional inoculation. When the feelings actually happen, you are much more ready for them and your response is better.

Rehearse so you are ready for the show and enjoy it more.

5. Are you worried about how you look or enjoying what you are doing?

As human beings we are socially conscious. We often wonder or worry about how we look. If we are performing in front of friends, family, audiences, scouts, media, etc., this is often an unfortunate trap. People, who worry about how they look, seldom look good. Ironically, those who are not self-conscious and are just fully enjoying their activity always look and perform the best. Total focus and engagement is what makes you look great. Be yourself and enjoy what you are doing.

The key to solving this self-conscious tendency is self-acceptance. If we know who we are, where our support is and how we want to live, we stop worrying so much about what others think. It frees us up to be ourselves and be what we can be. Dr. Matt Brown found these elements in interviews of Canada's top character athletes. He believes these things contribute to a better perspective in sport and life. Working on self-acceptance and perspective in the emotional world of sport can help us realize more of our potential in life.

6. Do irrational beliefs creep in on you?

Journalist Scott Taylor once suggested "The great thing about sport is that it enables us to care passionately about something that really doesn't matter". It's true. Sport enjoys an almost ridiculous status in life. In light of the importance community and global challenges, sport probably doesn't really deserve such status. However, because we do get so passionate about sport, it is a great place to learn about emotions and staying rational.

Watch out for the following irrational beliefs that can interfere with one's enjoyment and performance in sport. Sometimes they can also interfere with our recovery and health. They happen because of the irrational status and significance often given sport.

1. My self-worth is on the line. Our self-worth in life should be about many more things than a moment in sport. Make sure there is more to you than being a jock. Family member, community member, student, friend, teammate, citizen of the world are all part of a healthy rational identity. Put sport back in perspective.
2. I must be perfect. By definition this is impossible but in sport we often start thinking and feeling this way. The pursuit of excellence is highly commendable but expectations of perfection are irrational and often very dysfunctional. Free yourself up to take chances and excel. Leave perfection for the obsessive. It's who responds best to their mistakes that usually wins.
3. I must perform for others. Guilt can be a deadly emotion. Wanting to perform for others can be a powerful motivator and focus. Perceptions of have to as discussed earlier can destroy our focus and confidence. Perform with a clear mind and an unburdened heart. Don't let guilt (unintentional or not) develop from privileges you have been provided. Discuss this with parents, teammates and sponsors so you can do things for the right reasons.
4. The world must be fair. Unfortunately it often isn't. Sport is a good place to begin learning how to cope with the reality that the world isn't always fair. Certainly we should always fight for justice but an irrational belief that the world must always be fair can cause a lot of agony and heartbreak and hurt one's coping capability. Become a leader who can focus and perform through injustice.

The raison d'être of sport is to teach us how to stay rational in an irrational world. Enjoy the challenge.

7. Do you enjoy positive rivalries with opponents and teammates?

Positive rivalries have many advantages over negative rivalries in sport and life. Have you learned to embrace positive rivalries and enjoy the many payoffs? With positive rivalries, everything is positive. You respect and appreciate those you are competing with. Your mindset is "I hope you are good, because that makes me better and that's good for both of us". This attitude clearly brings out the best in everyone.

Golfer Tiger Woods enjoys positive rivalries with his fellow golfers. He admires and enjoys the challenge when his competitors perform well. This attitude has helped him perform superbly when being tested by a strong opponent. Susan Auch & Catriona Lemay-Doan developed a positive rivalry on their own team that enabled them to finish 1st and 2nd in the 500 metre Olympic Speed Skating Race in Nagano, Japan. Wayne Gretzky became Canada's leader in hockey because he loved playing the best. As a player, captain, and now manager and leader, Wayne loves positive rivalries. His play in Canada Cups, Stanley Cup finals, and the Olympics is legendary. He knew playing the best brought out the best in him. The respect he has for the game and the people who play it is amazing.

Keep your rivalries positive. When they slip and become negative, a lot of things deteriorate:

- Fear of failure creeps in
- Tension/pressure builds
- Negative images occur (that usually hurt you)
- Focus/concentration deteriorates
- Perspective disappears

The person into negative rivalries is at a significant disadvantage in terms of focus, enjoyment and performance. Appreciate and respect your competition. It will bring out the best in you and make for great team dynamics.

Where would we be without our competitors? Think about pick-up games where the competition is intense but the welfare of the participants is always the priority. If rivalries turn negative, no one will play. It's a lesson for life.

8. Do you draw lessons after every competition?

If you were an astronaut, you would debrief after every flight or exercise. When lives are at stake, it is critical to draw lessons from every experience. The exercise is not just to identify mistakes but also to see and recognize solutions.

We should do the same in sport. There is no point in feeling bad indefinitely about our mistakes. The key is to see the solution like great performers do, then look forward to the next opportunity.

Hopefully your coach helps you with accurate attributions after a competition. Effort, ability, task difficulty, and luck can all play roles in most sport outcomes. If your coach doesn't clarify attributions, seek out a trusted teammate, decide what you have learned and what you need to do next time. Once you have seen the solutions, it's time to let go and get some recovery.

9. How important is recovery?

Most people realize how important it is to train if you are an athlete. You need to develop the capacities to perform well. Equally important, however, is your state. If you are not well nourished, rested and hydrated, most of your capacities will be masked or lost. Training can be a waste of time if you don't take pride in recovery.

Releasing from worry, stretching properly, massage, hydration, good nutrition, rest and enjoyable activities are all part of recovery. Take pride in both passive and active recovery activities. It's the only way to make sure your training pays off the way it should.

Remember that recovery is mental and emotional as well as physical. Mental overload will affect your mental capacities and emotional fatigue can affect all capacities. Managing school and relationship demands can really affect your state and therefore your capacities.

Recovery is an important concept in sport and in life. Get good at it early.

10. Do you focus on the four areas of development between competitions?

There are four important areas of development for every athlete. Skill development is obviously important and requires lots of quality practice. Although a certain amount of quantity training is necessary for skill development, quality is probably the most important consideration. As well, for creative skill development, some time for exploration, trying things, taking risks, etc. can be important. Many of the very best, including Gretzky, suggest we shouldn't underestimate the potential of pick-up games for skill development.

Strategy development is the second major area. Every performer should have a game plan that involves the key strategies, cues and responses. Game plans should be simple enough to avoid overload yet comprehensive enough to hold focus. Simple well-executed strategies usually beat complex strategies that confuse or overload. Err on the side of simplicity.

Fitness development is the third component of development and preparation. It involves developing cardio-vascular fitness, flexibility and muscular strength and endurance. Physical training loads should be progressive as you mature but recovery should also be kept a priority. Team training can help make physical training enjoyable.

Psychological preparation and development is the fourth component. Although this area is often the last to be considered, top athletes like Olympic Diving Gold Medallist Sylvia Bernier believe good psychology can help you develop in all the other areas. Imagery can help you learn and train better. Relaxation can help recovery. Game plans can help you focus and execute strategies. Psychology can help you to get to know yourself better and develop a strong perspective. It can help you with team and interpersonal skills, pre-competition plans, focus plans, refocusing strategies, emotional management and debriefing. Take pride in all four areas of development. It is all part of helping you realize your potential.

11. Do you get the support you deserve?

To realize our potential we all need support. We all need challenge from time to time as well but support is a primary need. Ideally some of that support is unconditional which means we feel loved for who we are, not for what we accomplish. People who have that kind of support usually feel more secure, have a better perspective and as psychologist Abraham Maslow suggests, have a better chance to actualize their potential. Hopefully you feel unconditional support from some of the key people in your life. If you don't, explore some of the key relationships in your life. Sometimes support has accidentally and unintentionally come to feel conditional. It's hard to perform well in sport and life if you feel support is always conditional on how you perform.

Good caring two-way communication, where you interview one another, can help with rediscovering unconditional support or love. If unconditional support is not in the traditional places (eg. parents), invest in the people you admire and trust the most. It might be a friend, a grandparent, a teacher, a coach, or a relative. We all need a few people who can remind us who we are in simple non-judgmental ways.

Belief starts with being accepted by others. Find those who accept you for who you are and take pride in those relationships. We all deserve support but sometimes we have to find it. Life is a team game.

12. Do you think sport is good preparation for life?

Like life, we don't always get everything we deserve in sport. Sport is a great place to work on our persistence and coping skills when things don't go the way we want. We start to learn what is within our control and what is beyond our control. We can also learn how to support one another under pressure, so refocusing is not so difficult.

We can learn a good work ethic and improve our persistence and resilience. We can learn how to manage our emotions and become an exciting mix of caring and character. We can learn more about who we are and the importance of values. We can learn about teamwork, collective belief and human potential.

There are impressive possibilities but no guarantees. Sport has tremendous potential in many ways. For some it has led to drug abuse, eating disorders, violence, cheating, gambling, discrimination and lost souls. Approach this powerful vehicle with perspective, not dependency. Participate on your terms, so you get where you want to go and realize your positive potential.