The Importance of Adversity in Growth and Development

by Christian Lavers - Executive Vice-President, US Club Soccer

The development path to excellence in anything is filled with moments of great reward; but challenge, disappointment, and frustration are also frequent companions on the road. While that sounds demotivating, and perhaps an article about growth and development shouldn’t be so blunt, this truth cannot be hidden or ignored. Ignoring reality doesn’t make it different, and naivety almost always impairs anyone’s ability to navigate complex situations.

The value of embracing adversity is almost always discovered in the aftermath. This is because it is also a truth that learning in the face of (and from) challenge, disappointment and frustration is incredibly important to understanding what it takes to be successful. Learning these lessons well, and surviving the tests that they impose, then leads to even greater moments of exhilaration, confidence, and accomplishment.

Renowned talent-development researcher Daniel Coyle uncovered a literary gem written by a California parent who understands this truth in a blog entry that starts with the beautifully blunt statement, “Please do not lift my son or daughter to the top of the ladder.” (“Please Don’t Help My Kids” ) The summary of the article comes in three concise sentences:

I don’t want my son or daughter to learn that they can’t overcome obstacles without help. I don’t want them to learn that they can reach great heights without effort. I don’t want them to learn that they are entitled to the reward without having to push through whatever it is that’s holding them back and “earn” it.
When an athlete faces adversity, encourage them to think how they can solve it themselves, push them to think critically about what they can do better.

This thought— that any significant achievement and growth always involves embracing and overcoming adversity – is key to learning. In fact, the willingness to stretch boundaries of performance and comfort levels is the only way that real growth occurs. When athletes are stretching boundaries (often referred to as being outside of their comfort zone), they inevitably make mistakes and frequently fail in their performance.

In athletics, these boundaries take the form of speed of execution, speed of pressure, complexity of technique, speed and complexity of thought, quality of opposition and a thousand more forms. When an athlete moves “up to the next level” in any game, they are by definition nearly always outside of their comfort zone – at least in the short term.

In the end, athletes that are comfortable stretching their boundaries are the ones that find the greatest growth, and ultimately greatest success. Renowned strength coach Vern Gambetta (and others) summarize this concept in the thought that, to be great, you must “be comfortable being uncomfortable.” More bluntly put: the best learners embrace challenge and adversity as a requirement for growth and achievement. The best coaches create environments that challenge limits and take athletes places they wouldn’t go on their own, and even create adversity from time to time for this reason.

When combining the thoughts presented one very basic, but exceptionally powerful conclusion is reached:

Young athletes, when facing moments of frustration or challenge in their personal sporting development, must be encouraged to solve problems themselves, work harder to overcome disappointments, and take ownership and control of their own destinies.

In today’s society, unfortunately, the pressure to remove any sign of potential adversity in front of athletes or young adults is pervasive – and completely contrary to the above statement. Well-intentioned individuals (parents, coaches and others) frequently try to remove every obstacle and challenge on the road their young athlete travels. The unfortunate product of these good intentions is only realized when the athlete finally comes to a challenge that they must meet alone – and then find themselves completely unprepared to deal with it at a stage in life where it is difficult to recover.

Parents must be able to accept the possibility of their athlete’s failure. Many times, it is the fact that the parents themselves cannot handle their athlete’s failure that causes them to intervene in the process – and immediately stop learning.

To paraphrase the famous quote by Eric Hoffer: “In a world of change, the learners shall inherit the earth, while the knowers will find themselves beautifully equipped for a world that no
longer exists.” Such is also the fate of an athlete that has not learned how to overcome problems of playing time, position, achievement, or winning on their own – they never learn resilience. There is no athlete that has ever made it to the top without tremendous resilience forged from dealing with adversity in their career.

Ironically, an athlete’s ability to embrace adversity – to learn resilience – is often directly impacted by other people’s ability to allow them to wrestle with adversity. The most important influence in this regard is their parents. In other words, parents must be able to accept the possibility of their athlete’s failure. Many times, it is the fact that the parents themselves cannot handle their athlete’s failure that causes them to intervene in the process – and immediately stop learning.

Mayo Clinic psychologist Max Trenerry notes that “the concept of willingness to accept adversity or failure is important whether learning new skills in sports, or dealing with anxiety-provoking thoughts in therapy. While every parent may ‘rescue’ their children from time-to-time, doing so frequently creates bigger long-term complications and prevents growth of personal resilience.”

U.S. Soccer Women’s National Team Developmental Director Jill Ellis states it this way:

Refusing to intervene as a parent forces the athlete to “go inside themselves” first. We see whether players can do this in a much more acute way in youth national team camps – where player emotions are naturally elevated. We see how they respond to small moments of disappointment as an indicator of their resilience. Do shoulders slump when a shot is missed? Are there tears because they didn’t play much? The initial reaction is very telling.

As a player, take these thoughts as you move into higher levels or older age groups, and when you are disappointed with your role, performance, or results. As a parent, coach or confidant, take these thoughts into account when you talk to an athlete in these defining moments. When an athlete you care about faces adversity, encourage them to think how they can solve it themselves, push them to think critically about what they can do better, and ask them to demonstrate the maturity to talk to their coaches themselves. Usually, the athlete already knows the answer and what they need to do better – they only need help digging it up.

While the discussion may be uncomfortable, and while a young athlete may show resistance to the thought that it isn’t always someone else’s fault, the long-term outcome will be a more confident, resilient, and successful person.

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