

3.2 Post-Sports Competition and Mental Keys

Competition is costly, demanding and very challenging, and its "repayment" comes into effect at the end. This final instant is, in sum, the down time when competitive executions no longer take place and commentaries and repercussions, one's own and from others, take the key leading role. It is time to live with the victory or defeat, with successes and mistakes, is the time of analysis and assessment of performance and results.

The body has relaxed, but the mind does not always shut off. When the results are positive and exceed previous expectations, euphoria continues and the celebration creates mental states of hyper-activation that decrease very gradually. If the results were worse than what was expected, annoyance, anger and even disappointed emotionally block the athlete and coach and submerge them in a highly individual moment where the search for explanations and a mental review of what happened become obsessions.

Post-competition is an essential moment both for the athlete as well as for the coach. It is the time in which the body and the mind should recover, emotions should regulate and, thus the athlete's and coach's disposition renew so as to be able to orient themselves for upcoming trainings or competitive challenges. But it does not always happen this way, the expected repair and recovery are not always achieved. When the results are positive, the athlete's and coach's recovery is made easy, but when the results or performance were unfavorable, the transition to post-competition does not tend to be so nice.

After an unexpected defeat or a poor-quality performance that is worse than what was expected, athletes usually tend to choose isolation, they close themselves up in their own minds. This solitary search is not fruitful; on the contrary, in the majority of cases it ends up creating complex emotional states that demand various days to recover.

Trying to manage the athlete's emotional state post-competition is a job that is included among the sports coach's task. They not only must optimize and regulate their emotions, but also must try to make the post-competitive period be truly restorative for each athlete. To this end it is necessary to learn to develop all of the abilities that are associated with physical and emotional restoration. It is necessary for coaches to know that their professional job does not end when the game is over, which is why it is key that they guide their athletes' recovery so that it is effective.



It is a priority for the coach to be convinced of this necessity and to be the first to adopt a restorative routine. Coaches often are "knocked out" by competitions and it is necessary that they quickly recover from their emotional injuries. If this does not happen, their influence will come from annoyance, from anger or disappointment. None of these states is recommendable for exerting the best influence on the athlete.

3.2.1 Managing Dysfunctional Emotional States

There are a few questions that the majority of coaches repeat. One of these has to do with if it is necessary to talk with the athletes at the end of the competition or if it is preferable to let them go so they can recover and to have the relevant conversation during the next training. Usually, we find almost opposite opinions among coaches on this topic. There are those who believe they must talk to their athletes, regardless of the situation, and those who believe it is more suitable not to talk with the athletes until the next practice, also regardless of the situation.

What do we recommend? Clearly the most advisable is to address the situation and make the most suitable decision accordingly. Addressing the situation means detecting the presence of dysfunctional emotions or lack thereof and, based on that, adopting the most suitable decision. It is not advisable to always talk post-competition, and neither is it advisable not to talk until the next training in certain cases. There are emotions that are dysfunctional and that demand that the coach knows how to appropriately act to regulate the athlete's emotional state and encourage a post-competitive period that is closer to the ideal.

The dysfunctional emotions that affect athletes' and coaches' post-competitive period are:

- Euphoria.
- Dysphoria.
- Anger.

Euphoria is a transitory emotional state associated with the athlete's happiness, with behavioral expressions that are characterized by continuous excitation, absolute thoughts and heightened activation levels that are maintained for a given time. Surely, you may think that this is an enjoyable state and is not at all dysfunctional. However, even though it is enjoyable, heightened activation levels over time create an energy consumption that means that the athlete cannot fall asleep suitable and, as such, cannot rest.

Euphoria is tiring, it necessarily consumes a lot of energy that is not registered at the time of euphoria, but later the drop in activation level is very substantial. As a result, the athlete moves from being over-activated to being under-activated. This state of under-activation requires a significant recovery time and, as such, delays the preparation period for the next competition.

Regulating euphoria is key in cases in which the competitive mode takes place over consecutive days or every few days. In this type of competition, post-competition recovery is decisive. So, what should the coach do to regulate euphoria?

We suggest sending messages that do not last very long, as an athlete will generally have difficulties sustaining his attention on a single attentional focus for a long time after a competition. We recommend a clear message that acknowledges the performance or the success and that is accompanied with the importance of taking a limited time for celebration so as not to emotionally obstruct the recovery, with an eye towards the next competitive challenge. Remember that euphoria is very expensive and can always bring along a significant drop in activation level.

The opposite side of euphoria is dysphoria or depression. This negative emotional state is usually generated by negative results in momentous situations or by very poor performance. It is expressed behaviorally by the athlete's discontinuation of social contact with his environment, and by secluding himself and choosing isolation as the state of greatest comfort. At the cognitive level, in turn, thought ellipses develop in which the athlete tries to find explanations for what happened. This mechanism is very obsessive and harmful, as it essentially develops a type of catastrophic future thinking about the consequences associated with the unfavorable result or poor performance.

Dysphoria or depression also consume a lot of energy and keep activation levels continually low, making the recovery process completely impaired and it keeps consuming the athlete's energy instead of rehabilitating it.

Table 4: Dysfunctional Elements and Levels of Emotional Energy

Dysfunctional Emotions	Levels of Emotional Energy
Euphoria	Positive highs
Dysphoria	Negative lows
Anger	Negative highs

Source: Prepared by the author.

The coach's message must be oriented towards de-escalation, clearing the negative emotional weight that the athlete is experiencing, and redirecting it towards a short-term objective. It is important to capture the athlete's attention and orient it towards a new short-term goal.



As far as anger goes, it is a negative emotional state characterized by a heightened activation levels and feelings of annoyance and/or disagreement towards a third part or towards the athlete himself. This negative emotion generally affects the athlete's interpersonal relationships due to his low tolerance and his state of irascibility. In many cases, anger impairs the connections among athletes on the same team or between the athlete and the coach.

Attitudinally, an angry athlete finds himself in an explosive state, with heightened levels of negative energy and feelings of injustice. An athlete who is annoyed with himself is not the same as the athlete who is depressed by his performance. In the first case, negative energy levels are heightened in anger, while in dysphoria or depression negative energy levels are low.

An angry athlete can be very harmful to himself or his environment, due to his emotional explosions. The coach's participation is very important in these cases, as he is in charge of making sure there is observance of the team's norms for coexistence based on mutual respect between members.

Anger is also very costly in terms of energy, not just because of the energy that it consumes, but also because of all the additional energy required for recovery actions. When an athlete lowers his activation levels and can analyze his post-competitive activity, he becomes aware that he has executed many unsuitable actions. As a result, he carries out a series of actions intended to repair the damage inflicted on teammates, coaches or himself. "Everything that is begun in rage, ends in shame."

Table 5: Dysfunctional Emotions and Suggestions for the Coach

Dysfunctional Emotions	Suggestions to the Coach
Euphoria	Short messages Clear messages
Dysphoria/Depression	Emotional guidance Short-term objectives
Anger	Respect for standards

Source: Prepared by the author.

It is necessary that the coach be convinced of the management of his own and his athletes' post-competition emotions. Coaches sustain large emotional deregulations in competitions, and the emotional aftermath can last a long time; as a matter of fact, to a greater or lesser extent, they



almost always end up being transferred to the team or athlete in daily interactions. This contamination of the coach-athlete connection by unmanaged post-competition emotions impairs the relationship and in many cases brings along other disturbances that can entail a break in the connection.

Sports coaches need to find a post-competition emotional regulation routine that lets them to keep going with their life—with the other aspects of their life, that is. Usually, when the competition was positive, the coach goes on with his life with a sense of normalcy, boasting and enjoying socialization. When the result was unfavorable, socialization is discontinued, family plans are disrupted or put aside and life outside of work stops happening, which creates a very vicious cycle wherein the sport oscillates between being the most important thing and the only important thing for the coach.

This vicious cycle creates coaches who are absolutely dependent on results, who have high levels of anxiety and low levels of enjoyment. This combination of circumstances, as a result, does not only affect their emotional health, but also the sports coach's physical, affective and social health. High performance for sports coaches, as well as for athletes, means having a life outside of work.

3.2.2 The Attentional Readaptation Period

When the competition is over, the athlete generally has an inability to maintain attentional focus for a sustained period, as a consequence of the exhaustion generated by the competition. When dysfunctional emotions appear, the athlete's attentional direction also suffers changes. As such, at times attentional flexibility is lost and it is necessary for the coach to be able to act immediately to recover the attentional flexibility required for future sports situations.

Table 6: Dysfunctional Emotions and Predominant Attentional Direction

Dysfunctional Emotions	Predominant Attentional Direction
Euphoria	External
Dysphoria	Internal
Anger	Internal

Source: Prepared by the author.

Euphoria impedes analysis and preparation for execution. A euphoric athlete predominantly evaluates and executes. It will be the sports coach's



task to work with the athlete so that they can recover internal attentional focuses through analysis of certain situations and preparation before execution. In this sense, it is necessary that the athlete stop high-speed, automatic execution. In this case, the coach must know that if he plans complex and long training programs, the athlete that is or was euphoric may not present his best performance due to lack of attentional flexibility.

On the other hand, when the dysfunctional emotions are negative, predominant attentional direction is interior and thoughts impose themselves on any external reality, causing the athlete to disregard relevant signals in their environment or be able to sustain an external focus. The coach must design a training that demands external attentional maintenance, contact with other athletes, attention to external signals and answers without analysis or preparation; this is how to encourage the recovery of attentional flexibility.

Finally, the coach must be very clear that recovering attentional flexibility is not only due to voluntary processes. Which is to say, wanting to be attentive is not enough. Attentional recovery takes time. That is why the coach's requirements and the training's exercises must be appropriate.

3.2.3 The Emotional Recovery Routine

After achieving a high level of enjoyment, we recommend three prompt actions for athletes as well as for sports coaches, namely:

- Focus more on performance than on results.
- Enjoy each day.
- Develop compassion.

It is important that the athlete understand that there are many things that depend on his and many others that do not. Performance and level of execution are things that full depend on the athlete, and it is important to focus on that. Furthermore, he should know that the more performance improves, the more possibilities there are to achieve better results. It is necessary for the athlete to think and focus on his execution, on his abilities and on his game plan. In this way, uncertainty about the result decrease as well as anxiety about his own performance. Focusing on performance, the athlete gains self-efficacy and increases his levels of enjoyment.

The second suggestion for having a positive emotional level is learning to enjoy each day. Actions that help to enjoy the day to day include learning to value training, effort, achievement of goals, and the journey, as well as considering the need to define a vision or to stick to the training programs. The athlete who enjoys every day has a greater output of emotional energy and more strength with which to face competitive stress. It is

important to enjoy triumphs and success in sports, but not only victory. Addiction and slavery to results is a torture for anyone, particularly for any athlete.

Finally, we recommend befriending oneself: An athlete should conduct an internal conversation in which he is able to accept errors on the path to growth and challenges, and consequently not torture himself emotionally when executions or results are unfavorable. A high performance athlete learns to de-escalate unfavorable or complex situations using compassion.

This is made up of three phases:

- Acceptance.
- Understanding.
- Forgiveness.

It is very healthy for the athlete to understand that he must learn to live with the mistake and that, in this game of coexistence, the first measure that should be accepted is that which will be wrong. He must internalize that mistakes are part of the journey and that due to this he will work hard to lessen the margin of error or the number of frequent errors. With acceptance of mistakes we are not at all proposing the deliberate search for mistakes; on the contrary we are proposing accepting the fact that the athlete will make mistakes, that all athletes commit errors and that the secret to high performance is learning not to abuse yourself.

Understanding means involving reason to describe why the error happened and finding improvement or learning and correction alternatives. Acceptance allows the error to be possible; understanding allows it to be transient. Understanding why an error occurs helps to modify behavior and accelerates the possibility of incorporating appropriate behavior.

Finally, the most complex action has to do with accepting that the athlete is fallible, that they try to do their best and so to forgive from a place of acceptance and understanding. Forgiveness releases the negative emotions and issues an invitation to develop new techniques or skills.

3.2.4 The Value of the Personal Time vs. Work Time Balance

Understanding high performance grants very important benefits both for the athlete as well as for the coach. High performance is challenging, it demands a lot of involvement and commitment, and without full adherence to the training programs, the athlete will not be able to achieve said high performance. High performance cannot be achieved without fulfilling each demand—but without enjoyment, it cannot be sustained.



In high performance, more is not always better, and less is not always a mistake. Focusing on sports 24 hours a day, 365 days a year is not the wisest suggestion. On the contrary, for high performance it is necessary to adhere fully to training programs, be committed to sports work standards and also have a good life outside sports.

If the athlete or coach only thinks, talks, consumes and watches sports and the only thing that matters is the results of the sport, a vicious circle takes shape which does not only impair execution level in the short- or medium-term, but also stamps out enjoyment and brings them closer to emotional exhaustion. The athlete and the coach must have more in their lives than just sports. Being high performance means learning other kinds of wisdom, sharing with other people from other contexts, knowing other realities and having other plans besides sports plans.

Castiñeira Fernández and Lozano (2012) group these suggestions. They name PWT (personal work time), which they differentiate from LWT (labor work time). When this imbalance between the PWT and the LWT is very pronounced, the emotions of the athletes begin to experience sharp fluctuations, they begin to lose consistency and constant mood swings begin to manifest.

It is essential that the coach not only adheres to this idea of PWT, but is able to stimulate each of his athletes to develop activities that have nothing to do with sports; in short, to grow and learn other areas, other skills and other activities that make them grow as humans. Personal growth and development (PWT) encourages development and growth of the athlete (LWT).

No athlete can sustain high performance, much less enjoy it, if their life is nothing more than sports. Sports are a marvelous activity, rich in experiences and rife with tools that give the athlete a lot of satisfactions and enrich their personal life. Sports are one part of life, not all of life.

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