

Great players have the ability to flush mistakes. That ability is like learning a new language. “This simply was a mistake. Let us learn from it and move on.” This is easier said than done.

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1.4 Embracing Mistakes to Become Your Best

You can never be your best if you fear mistakes. If you are afraid of making mistakes, you will play tentatively, and tentative players usually get beat.

Being afraid of making a mistake is worse than making one. Let me say that another way. It is better to *make* a mistake than to be *afraid* of making one.

Sports are filled with mistakes. The best baseball hitters fail about 70 percent of the time. Great shooters in basketball miss roughly half their shots. Elite cornerbacks in football and closers in baseball cultivate “short memories” to quickly put mistakes behind them and prepare for what’s next. Every athlete makes mistakes – lots of them.

What separates great athletes from the rest is how they deal with mistakes. Strange as it sounds, to become a Triple-Impact Competitor, you must embrace – not fear – mistakes.

■ Becoming a Player Who Makes Things Happen

Legendary UCLA basketball coach John Wooden, who led his teams to 10 NCAA championships, said, “The team that makes the most mistakes will probably win. . . The doer makes mistakes, and I wanted doers on my team – players who make things happen.”

Consider this statement by Wayne Gretzky, widely regarded as the greatest hockey player of all time: “You miss 100 percent of the shots you never take.” Despite the fact that Gretzky was not particularly big or strong or fast, he was a great competitor who focused on what he wanted to accomplish rather than worry about mistakes he might make. He was a player who made things happen.

With this attitude toward mistakes, Wooden’s players and Gretzky were able to play more aggressively. In almost every sports situation, the more aggressive athlete or team usually does better than the more timid athlete or team. But fear of making a mistake is deadly for aggressiveness and leads to timid play.

How do you become a player who makes things happen? By developing a fearlessness about mistakes that comes from knowing you can quickly rebound from them. And that comes from having a mistake ritual that you can count on.

■ Using a Mistake Ritual to Develop Mental Toughness

A mistake ritual is something you do and say to transform your fear of mistakes so you don’t play timidly. It helps you quickly reset so you can focus on the next play rather than beating yourself up for making a mistake.

A popular and effective mistake ritual is “The Flush.” You react to a mistake with a motion like flushing a toilet while saying, “Flush it. Next play!”

Then you force your attention on the next play. Even though your inner voice may want to chastise you for making a mistake, refuse to allow the negativity to stay in your mind. If necessary, repeat, “Flush it! Next play!” and make the flushing motion again.

Over time, using a mistake ritual in this way builds mental toughness. The key is to focus on what you want to do the next play, knowing you can recover quickly if you do make a mistake. The more you do this, the more your mental toughness grows.

If “The Flush” doesn’t feel right to you, try one of these other options or make a mistake ritual of your own. Which one you use isn’t important, but using one is.

- “No Sweat:” Wipe your fingers across your forehead as if flicking sweat from your brow. “No sweat. Forget it. Next play!”

- “Brush It Off:” Motion as if brushing dirt off your shoulder.
“Brush it off. Next play.”

■ Always the Most Important Play

Many people enjoy debriefing a game and deciding which play was the most important. But the most important play is always the same for a Triple-Impact Competitor: the next play.

In sports there is almost always a next play. The athlete who beats herself up over the last play is not going to be ready for it. One coach uses the acronym NBA to help his players rebound from mistakes. NBA stands for Next Best Action. Instead of focusing on a mistake, players focus on what they most need to do next.

Here is Stanford women’s volleyball coach John Dunning, whose teams have won three NCAA titles, on the next play:

“So many kids think they’re great competitors because they growl the loudest or cuss the loudest. I define a competitor as the person who is most often ready to play and win the next play. You’ve got to get the last play out of your mind, except the part that educates you. The person who consistently is most ready to win the next play is the person I want on my side of the net – not the growler.”

■ What Are Mistakes Good For?

Let’s stay with Coach Dunning a bit longer: get rid of the last play “except the part that educates you.” Triple-Impact Competitors use mistakes to get better, by quick in-game adjustments or by setting them aside for the next practice.

Great athletes look at mistakes or failure as feedback. The trick is to know what to do with that feedback. Mistakes in a competition can lead to immediate adjustments, like when you’ve guessed wrong about your opponent’s strengths or weaknesses. Or, you may have forgotten your role on a given play or lost your focus at a critical moment, so you increase your concentration and refocus on your role.

But some mistakes need to be “parked” and returned to later. If you are a swimmer and mistiming your flip turns in an important meet, concentrate on making better flip turns. At the same time, make a mental note to work on your turns in the next practice. That’s “parking” a mistake. There is no time to break down your mechanics during the competition. That’s all right. Relax, flush the mistake, focus on the next play, and work on it later.

■ A Championship Turn-Around

Having the right mindset about mistakes can make a huge difference on the scoreboard. Midway through the 2004 season, with the Cal State Fullerton Titans baseball team’s record at 15-16, the coach brought in sports psychology consultant Ken Ravizza to work with the team.

Ken installed a coin bank in the form of a toilet in the dugout (the handle made the sound of a toilet flushing). Players began flushing their bad plays down the toilet when they came in from the field. Ravizza also asked them to imagine they had a miniature toilet on their belts so they could flush bad plays before they got into the dugout.

The result was dramatic and immediate. The Titans were able to leave their bad plays behind, focus on the “next play,” and perform to their capabilities. After implementing the mistake ritual, the Titans went 32-5. They qualified for the NCAA College World Series and promptly lost their first game in the double-elimination tournament. They won their way back up through the loser’s bracket to play Texas in the championship game, needing to beat the Longhorns twice in a row, which they did. Cal State Fullerton used the power of a mistake ritual to help become national champions.

A mistake ritual doesn't make a champion out of a mediocre team. But it allows teams to play up to their potential, which for the Titans was national championship caliber. Use Exercise 4 on the following page to develop your own mistake ritual.

Exercise 4: Developing a Mistake Ritual

Triple-Impact Competitors adopt a different mindset about mistakes. They recognize that mistakes are inevitable. As a result, they don't fear them. To help recover from mistakes, Triple-Impact Competitors use mistake rituals to allow them to quickly refocus on the most important play – the next one. Over time, they develop a mental toughness to bounce back from mistakes, which also gives them the confidence to compete aggressively on every play.

1. In the space below, describe the mistake ritual you plan to use this season. It may be one of the three mentioned in Chapter 1.4 (The Flush, No Sweat, or Brush It Off), or one that you create on your own.
2. Then identify at least one teammate or coach with whom you will share your new mindset about mistakes so they can support your effort throughout the season to recover quickly from mistakes. You can describe your mistake ritual to them so they can reinforce it from the field or sideline after you've made a mistake.

My Mistake Ritual _____

I will share my new approach toward mistakes with



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