

Develop to Win!: A Guide to Continuous Personal Growth for Athletes

by

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Chapter 1

Giving can make you a better athlete

When I asked twelve-year-old Michele what she liked about gymnastics, she said, “I like to show people what I can do.” When I asked seventeen-year-old Kimberly what she liked about swimming, she said, “I like getting faster, improving my time, getting to be the best I can be.” And fifteen-year-old Jeff – a downhill ski racer – simply said, “I like to win.”

Sports counselors and athletes, like everybody else, are immersed in a *culture of getting*. What I mean by that is that showing others what we can do, improving our performance, and winning can all be versions of getting. The sports world, in many ways, epitomizes the getting culture. In a culture of getting, competition becomes *all* about getting. Sometimes, the getting is thinly veiled as “teamwork,” which means “help the team win,” or as “give your best performance” which means that you hope to win, but probably won’t. When I say, “getting,” I don’t mean “getting,” as in acquiring a gold medal, a Nike contract, personal satisfaction or a thrilling feeling. I mean the *activity* of getting which is over-determined by the getting culture regardless of the goal or the outcome. Athletes *do* getting in spite of getting anxious about winning and getting heartache from losing, and in spite of getting “character development,” which means being told to “toughen up!” – which is not what they are in the getting game to get. Out

of fear of looking like they are bad at getting, athletes relentlessly and tenaciously devote themselves to getting better at getting. I wrote *Develop to Win!* to help athletes get out of the frustrating and demoralizing getting game.

In my opinion, it is not possible for athletes – for any of us in this culture – to be emotionally detached from getting. It is impossible not to react to it, and not to be determined by it. Bette, a swimmer, tells me that before a race she becomes nauseated to the point of vomiting. Bob, a golfer, tells me that he trembles when he addresses the ball. (He stands to demonstrate a short, jerky swing.) Lois, a professional tennis player, says that when she is serving a tiebreaker, she panics and double faults. It puzzles her that she never double-faults when she is definitely losing. Karen, a figure skater, complains that when she competes, she often opts out of the more difficult jumps, or does not arch back quite far enough as she spins. Like most of my clients, she is mystified by her poor concentration and decision making “under pressure.” In my view, my clients, all of whom I deeply respect and admire, are attached to getting and thwarted by fear – not the fear of failing to perform well, but the fear of failing at getting; fear of the condemnation of the crowd for being an inferior getter.

Despite the heartache, anxiety and disappointment of the getting game, there are rewards, and parents, athletes and coaches hope that the sports world is a healthy place to grow and learn. They want to believe that sports can provide important lessons, satisfying lives, and for the lucky (hard working and talented) ones, lucrative careers. With *Develop to Win!* I want to help make those dreams – especially the dreams of sport as a growthful place – a reality for those who chose to pursue them. The getting game, however, is a very real obstacle. Today, October 27, 2004 (You can pick any day and there will be a

similar story.) the TV sports newscasters announced the firing of Ron Zook, the head football coach at the University of Florida. Here is what Dick Crepeau, a sports commentator, said: “Ron Zook... stood before the press... choked up and blubbing. It [sports] is a sordid little world in which human beings are routinely humiliated, young men are routinely chewed up, and the cheering never stops.” Not only are we in a getting culture, but the sports world provides a very brutal, unforgiving version of it.

It is the important discovery of Fred Newman, the founder of social therapy, the therapy that I practice, and that this book is based on, that this fear of failing to be a good getter is based on a mistaken societal premise, an incorrect philosophical assumption, not a psychological problem. We don't fail at getting; *getting fails us*. Getting deprives us of emotional development. *Develop to Win!* shows athletes how giving emotionally in a culture of getting helps them to perform not just better, but more joyously.

Much of the help in *Develop to Win!* consists in giving athletes support as they decide whether they want to grow emotionally, and whatever choice they make, to help them to take responsibility for their decision. By “decide,” I don't mean decide once-and-for-all. I mean continually deciding to grow emotionally *simultaneously* with learning how to grow emotionally in a culture of getting. It is, after all, within this culture – the one that continuously humiliates them – that athletes want help with their emotional pain around performance. Both the cheering that the good getters enjoy *and* the booing that the badly beaten bear makes it hard to grow; either way, getters continuously are emotionally caught up in the getting game.

For all of its likeness to, “*It is better to give than to receive,*” when I first heard Fred Newman talk about giving emotionally, it wasn't at all obvious to me what he meant.

Giving can just be a ploy for getting, can't it? Giving emotionally is not the same as giving materially. How would I give emotionally? What would I be doing if I were giving emotionally? More recently, I have come to accept, albeit with difficulty, that the practice of social therapy includes, in part, relinquishing the expectation that what Newman (or anyone) says should be obvious. When we expect what others say to be obvious, we reduce our ideas and conversations to mutually exclusive categories as I did with what Newman said. I assumed that it had to be *material vs. emotional giving*, or *giving-to-get vs. giving-for-no-reason*. The practice of social therapy means that I stop trying to *know* what others mean; stop trying to name it, label it, or categorize it; stop trying to *get* it. I try to help my readers do that with me. I lead us in creating what we are doing together – making meaning and building our relationship.

Social therapists believe that it is simply an illusion that it is possible for human beings to know anything at all. Knowing requires us to extract ourselves from our environment, the world, the universe, and to view it as if we are external to it. That is not possible. We are deeply embedded in our environment, not external to it. Nevertheless, our language, our culture for 2500 years, Newtonian physics, the Enlightenment, and Cartesian philosophy are based on the assumption that this simple truth – that it is impossible to get outside our universe and observe it – is false. Knowing is not possible and performing as if we are knowers gets in the way of our creating. Social therapists believe that all we can do as human beings is create. We continuously create what is, what exists. You may protest, “A tree exists. Humans didn't create that tree out there.” But what does it mean to say “out there,” if we are not external observers? A tree – the meaning of a tree, its purpose, its beauty, its history, its existence as a “tree” (living,

breathing, shading, fueling, and sheltering) – is created by humans. Humans are a meaning-making species. Our universe, our environment is a complex network of meanings that we create. It is in that sense that what *is*, isn't given; it hasn't been given to us, nor is it "a given." We are co-creating it with each other. That we are "exploring" what "exists" is a myth.

It takes courage to live as a creator of what momentarily exists (unless we continuously recreate it) rather than as a consumer of what is eternally present. Social therapy helps people develop that courage. That is a large part of emotional growth that social therapists help their clients with; creating together entails being social with each other, and getting emotionally close to each other, hence, "social therapy."

Respected thinkers of the last century – Russell, Einstein, Heisenberg, Gödel, and Wittgenstein – solved the problem of knowing. They showed with mathematical equations, physics experiments, language analysis, and abstract reasoning that knowing is not possible – systems of knowing, objective conceptual structures, by mathematical necessity, are either incomplete or paradoxical. But we, those of us who continue to create Western civilization, as much as we acknowledge their genius, ignore their crucial discovery. The objectification of the world and systemization of knowledge have brought great benefits to humankind, but that doesn't mean that knowing is possible or that it is helpful to people in emotional pain. From the social therapy perspective, knowing is hurtful.

Joe, a runner, came to me after ten years in psychotherapy during which he tried to figure out his relationship with his wife. He still hasn't figured it out; the marriage is still stressful, but he is committed to it. He wanted to work with me on his confidence and

focus when he was racing. We worked on creating our relationship, our therapy team. After six sessions, he said that he was communicating better than ever with his wife, he was having more fun than ever running, and for the first time he was winning. Why? Because when we give up trying to know, analyze, and fix our lives, we are free to live and create them. Joe was, for the first time in his life, paying attention to what was happening, instead of trying to “figure it out.” In our sessions, we worked on what was hard for him about giving up knowing, and what he feared would happen if he gave up knowing. We worked on what it was like for him to give up knowing in our conversations, as we spoke with each other. We worked on giving to the process of creating our conversation, instead of on getting answers and tips about confidence and focus.

I like to think that for Joe and me, giving rather than knowing is becoming the organizing principle of our emotional lives. Naturally, just as I do, Joe has conflicts about giving. When I first heard about social therapy, my conflicts led me to ask all those questions about what it means to be emotionally giving. They led me to try to “understand” what Newman meant – put what he said in a category, relate it to something I already knew.

Not surprisingly, like their fear of failing to be good getters, athletes’ conflicts around giving are part of their performance in therapy. In therapy, my clients and I can use those conflicts – create our conversation around these conflicts and build our therapeutic relationship. We create an environment in which we give our conflicts, in spite of our conflicts about giving. Here’s how some of these conflicts about giving look in social therapy with athletes:

James, a tennis player, said to me that he felt bad when he beat his opponents, but he feared that if he were giving – if somehow he let that feeling show – he would get ripped off. That conflict distracted him and he didn't play well as a result.

Isaac, a twelve-year-old soccer player, wouldn't risk taking a shot at the goal. That would mean giving his confidence to the team, and he worried that he had no confidence to give.

Lauren, a fourteen-year-old gymnast and a very high-powered getter, failed to make the national team. Her coach asked her to help out coaching a younger group of gymnasts, but the idea of giving infuriated her. Because she was so infuriated, her performance only deteriorated, further dashing her hopes.

Isabel, a thirty-year-old equestrian, was frustrated when her horse balked at a fence during a competition. To her, it meant that all her hard work and long hours of training “went down the tubes.” She refused to see the work she'd been doing as giving. The idea of giving – doing something without getting – for nothing and to no one in particular, was disturbing. It kept her from focusing on her goals.

Abby, a figure skater, was terrified of performing. She was known as the “cool cucumber,” and she had decided that if she performed, everyone would see that she wasn't so cool – they would see her vulnerabilities. We agreed that if she would give her vulnerabilities, her emotionality, as part of her performance that would make her more attractive to others. That would make others want to be closer to her. She was terrified of that.

At the beginning of their therapy, James, Isaac, Lauren, Isabel and Abby did not want to discuss their conflicts around giving. They wanted help to overcome their loss of

concentration and confidence. They didn't see how a "discussion" with me about the difficulty of giving would help. They thought I could help them with visualization or hypnosis. Didn't I know how to do that? Why didn't I give them that help? What kind of sport psychologist was I anyway?

As they *gave* their disagreements to our conversation, I led us in making giving the organizing principle of our relationship. Our disagreements became the building blocks of our conversation, instead of points of view that we each simply felt correct about.

But how does development happen? In social therapy, we aren't exactly sure. We believe that emotional development is simultaneously a requirement for, *and* an activity of giving; giving is simultaneously a requirement for, *and* an activity of developing. And giving, as I have suggested, is related to giving up knowing. When we give up knowing we are open to creating with others – to giving our openness, giving possibilities to the activity of creating with others rather than knowing, labeling, and categorizing our conversational partners. In the case of sports, the athletes' "conversational partners" are the audience, the fans, family, friend, and the coach. The "conversation" isn't spoken, but if the performance unfolds as something less than what the athlete is capable of, or as inferior to the competition, the athlete gets labeled a loser, and the audience gets labeled as "critical" or "discerning" – they are smart enough to know the difference between a good and bad performance. They express their rightful disappointment at not being entertained with a high quality performance. I want to help athletes to develop emotionally so they can change that conversation.

Part of the social therapeutic understanding of development is that it is related to performance. I don't mean "performance" in the way we normally mean it – as in a

formal performance in front of an audience or the expert execution of a particular skill – but performance as the everyday activity of continuously creating our lives. This performance can help James, Isaac, Lauren, Isabel and Abby, but let’s take a look at how, for example, James and Isaac develop as they perform giving. They don’t know how to give; they have objections to giving; they need to develop in order to give. If they “perform” giving – giving to me in our conversation – they experience what giving is like for them. James can experience what he does with his fear of getting ripped off; he can experience what happens after that. Those experiences are developmental because they are building, giving activities. James will be emotionally richer; he will be able to give more. James performs his conflicts around giving and his conflicts around being a performer as we create an environment in which he could get help. When James doesn’t give because he is afraid of being ripped off, I say, “*Perform* giving! Just do it and we will see what happens.”

What if James and I assume that it’s true that people take advantage of us when we give; they see giving as a weakness. James and I might ask, “Why does it matter? Why should it impact how he plays tennis? *How* does it impact his playing?” In making it matter, of course, he distracts himself. Why not decide that it doesn’t matter? That’s a real question. Deciding not to make others’ opinions about giving matter isn’t always easy. Why is that so?

In getting to know each other in our first session, Isaac listed some of his achievements and then sat silently waiting to see whether I would praise him. He wanted to know what my judgment would be. But I asked him to do a different performance, which he gladly agreed to. I asked him to perform telling me – give me – what he was

proud of. Could he give me his list of achievements? We talked about his reticence about bragging. Where did he learn it? What did he think about it? What was it like to brag? How did he know when he was bragging? Could he ask me whether I thought he was bragging? In this conversation, we were less determined by (less victimized by) the societal admonition against bragging. We were creating our own definition of bragging. Isaac was giving his fears about bragging, in spite of his conflicts about giving; he was performing giving. James was going beyond himself – growing – to perform that conversation; he was growing *as we performed* that conversation. As he did so, he was giving to our conversation. This understanding of performance helps social therapists take some of the mystery about our ability to do something that we don't know how to do out of development.

Creating our performance is important in social therapy. In fact, social therapists are making a case for *Homo creator* (from the Latin: human, the maker) as the more accurate name for our species. As *Homo creator* we learn and grow by doing, by performing the activity of creating our lives. We learn by doing. We create as we perform. If Isaac waited until he knew how to pass a ball when an opponent was tripping him, he would never do it. He learns how to do it when he does it. Isaac received the biggest thrill when, in the heat of the moment in a close game, he magically shot the ball off his left heel (something he had never done before) straight to a surprised, but ready teammate. The moment demanded a new performance – a going-beyond-himself – and Isaac, to his own delight and that of his fans, delivered. In that moment, he was a creator, a performer, a not-knower.

Social therapy can help athletes be aware of and self-conscious about creating a not-knowing environment. They frequently create these environments naturally, automatically. They instinctively understand that they don't have to know how to do something before they do it. They learn how to pass the ball off the back of the left heel when they do it.

As our journey has so far shown, we don't have to look far to see that athletes have conflicts about giving. But it's not just athletes who struggle with giving. These conflicts go hand-in-hand with emotional underdevelopment at the coaching and administrative levels in sport as well. For coaches, often tireless givers of their energy and time, fear of failing to be a good getter makes them into desperate getters too. Their conflict and desperation are most evident in the authoritarian coaching style that prevails in many sports. It often includes baiting athletes with insults and creating rivalries among team members. Being emotionally underdeveloped, these coaches buy into the belief that an angry player will be an aggressive player. They promote rivalries to motivate players to work harder. They threaten players with punishment, including harder, longer workouts, believing that they will train harder to avoid more training. They wear athletes down, believing that such regimens give them authority. They believe that they own the hearts, minds, and souls of their athletes, and they control their lives on and off the playing field. In short, coaches justify any coaching tactic, if they think it will help their athletes win. Of course, not all coaches are emotionally ignorant bullies, and they alone don't make for an emotionally underdeveloped culture. The fact that the sports world tolerates and

rewards them is part of what I am referring to when I say they are desperate and conflicted.

One contributing factor is that there is very little training for coaches. Most do not study coaching philosophy or communication skills or developmental psychology. They coach the way their coaches coached them when they were athletes. Many coaches believe, “What was good enough for me is good enough for you. I came up with the hard knocks, and so can you.” Think about it. If the coaches of our kids are doing the same emotional performance that their coaches did, coaching philosophy and communication today could very well resemble these practices at the time of gladiators. Coaches (and the sports world) would not have developed emotionally since that time. Indeed, that is how it sometimes seems.

Coaches aren't bad people. As I have said, like most of us, they are over-determined by the dominant culture. Frequently all that is available to them is information about how to provoke athletes and make fun of them. I recently gave a lecture, “Making Youth Sports a Positive Experience,” as part of a day-long coaches' clinic at a well-known sports foundation. The foundation's philosophy was for kids to have fun. It's entire program was based on matching kids by size and ability so that everybody got an equal chance to play. The organizers were responding to complaints from parents who said that the coaches were abusive. They were concerned about the reputation of the program; kids quit in frustration long before they “graduated.” They asked me talk to the coaches about how to treat their charges like kids who were there to have fun, instead of like budding champions. To their credit, the ideals were there, but the training for coaches was just beginning to be available.

Although attendance at my talk was “required” for all coaches at the clinic, perhaps twenty percent came. The ones who ignored the requirements obviously had been tolerated, and would continue to be. In my opinion, despite good intentions, helping coaches to be less authoritarian and more giving is difficult because it goes against the getting culture. Coaches, like all of us, want to get the rewards of being good getters. Like the athletes they once were, they fear getting ripped off or being taken advantage of, if they give.

If you are flinging your cap on the pool deck when you see your time after a race, or throwing your hockey stick against the boards on bad call from the referee, doing what “comes naturally,” social therapy will teach you to perform something besides feeling bad. You can, for example, talk to your coach and teammates about a better race or game strategy. You can alter your automatic reactive behavior. That could change everything. It could change the world – your small part of the emotionally underdeveloped sports culture. In social therapy, the building blocks of our therapeutic relationships are those emotional challenges we face when we take on the task of changing our world.

Exercise: Read the sports page. How often do you hear in a story the assumption that winning is all that matters?

Ask a teammate what he or she thinks about winning and losing. See if you can come up with a question that will help both of you be more thoughtful about how important you want winning and losing to be, as opposed to some of your other reasons for participating in sports.

