



## Perfectionism

*"...I know that just as I am refining my pitching, I am refining the pleasure I get from it. A victory used to give me pleasure, then a well-pitched inning, and now I get satisfaction from just one or two pitches a game. I get in a situation where I have to apply all I know, mentally, physically, on just one pitch.' Seaver got great satisfaction, he said, 'in knowing that for one specific moment (he could) achieve perfection.'" – Tom Seaver, Hall of Fame Pitcher*

**PERSPECTIVE DEFINES PERFECTION:** In the quote above from Hall of Fame pitcher Tom Seaver one might get the impression that as he refined his pitching he refined his perspective of perfection. Yet, the opposite is true. As an athlete's perspective matures he becomes a better player because his expectations change of what he considers perfection and success. As Seaver matured, he simplified what perfection meant to him. He simplified what success meant to him. The result? Not surprisingly, as he began to take greater pleasure in being totally enthralled in each pitch he threw rather than focus on getting a win, he improved as a pitcher and often got the result he desired.

**THE PRISON OF PERFECTIONISM:** There is nothing wrong with working hard at your craft and doing your utmost to pursue greatness. Yet, perfectionism is a whole other level. Perfectionism is an immature way of thinking that imprisons and stunts the growth of any athlete that thinks anything less than perfection is unacceptable. The idea that you should be the best at everything, never struggle to acquire new knowledge or skill, and always come through in the clutch is foolish and immature thinking. It takes away any pleasure someone might have in the learning process.

Athletes who tend to learn new skills quickly and find themselves failing or stumbling for the first time in their careers often become defeated in mind and motivation. At some point they learned that because everything had come easy that everything should always come easy. These athletes believe perfectionism is a prerequisite (I already have it or I'll never have it) rather than a pursuit. This immature thinking and attitude must be acknowledged, challenged head on, and rerouted towards a more mature way of thinking of enjoying the struggle and pursuing the challenge with max effort until mastered. So, what's the first step in getting out of prison? Realizing that you are in it.

**FREEDOM IN FAILURE AND FORGIVENESS:** When you come to the realization that failure is a part of life and sport and a necessary step in any learning process you can begin to breathe easy and claim the freedom to *not have to be* perfect. When you give yourself permission to make mistakes you will play with more freedom resulting in you playing at your peak! Also, it becomes much easier to forgive yourself and move on when you've given yourself permission to fail. Failure is not permanent unless you say so. When you change your definition of failure and see it as a learning experience you will become motivated to better yourself rather than stay bitter with yourself. Get good at forgiving yourself. Stay encouraged and intent on growing from mistakes rather than repeating them.

Those who focus on *not* failing play with anxiety and fear while those who play with freedom to fail play with confidence and enthusiasm. Perfection is not necessary. Greatness is not needed. Being consistently good will get the job done and is hard enough as it is.

**THE POWER OF YET:** Though it might not seem like it, experiences where you fail are some of the quickest ways to speed up maturation and the learning curve. When you fail, you likely took a risk. Continue to take risks in sport and you will be rewarded sometimes and you'll look foolish sometimes. Don't shy away or become discouraged. Work with failure instead of allowing it to work you. And begin to believe that mastery is always a matter of when, not if. Learn from failure as you would a wise school master. And instead of saying, "I can't do that" reframe it to "I *can* do that...I just haven't done it YET."

**PERFECT THOUGHTS:** If perfection is to be approached it must first start in the mind with perfect thoughts. Where athletes go wrong first is in their thinking; not their actions. Thoughts dictate actions and perfect thoughts aid in you performing closer to perfection.

**GOING GREEK:** The Greek word for *perfect* is the adjective, *teleios*, and could be translated as mature, full grown, or complete. This word often refers to the mind of man in regards to his having the correct knowledge of what to do in a situation. In sport, perfection might be: *having a fully mature mental approach that refuses to be swayed by circumstances or people.*

To give an example of perfect or mature (fully grown) thinking, a pitcher with the bases loaded and one out may be persuaded by the circumstances to think *what could happen if...* Yet, the right knowledge regarding this situation is for the pitcher to know that he is one pitch away from an inning ending double play. The pitcher with a perfect (mature) thought pattern gives himself the best chance to produce corresponding believing action which would be to throw a low pitch for a groundball double play. *That* is perfection. Not the result that is outside his control. But the right thinking and right believing that precedes the action. The more that mature thinking and believing is applied the greater results the athlete is likely to achieve.

**PERFECTION = CORRECT THINKING + CORRESPONDING ACTION.** The more these two mold together as one the more mature the athlete becomes. But it starts with an earnest desire to mature in mind. It takes diligent effort and intention to grow. If the mind can see in perfect detail what it wants the body to do...the body is given the best chance to bring that action to fruition.

When we see *perfection* in this light – not as a result – but as a mental attitude of maturation and growth – perfection then becomes defined as choosing to think one right thought moment by moment. As you string enough of those moments together you give yourself the best chance of achieving the outcome you desire. Pleasure grows. Not in achieving the result, but in the mental process of mastering doing what you set out to do in one particular moment. Remember, in order to believe, there must first be information to believe. When you believe the right information to the point of action...that's perfection. That's full grown maturity for one brief moment.

## **YOUR TURN – TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR YOUR CAREER**

What was your definition of perfection prior to reading this?

In what ways has a perfectionist mindset been hurtful to your performance?

Now that you have a greater understanding of what perfection really is (a mature mental approach) what is your new definition of perfection for you?

What are 3 ways you might begin to pursue perfection differently?

1.

2.

3.

