

Total Athlete Development Excerpt 4

6 Ways to Keep a Winning Attitude During a Slump

To help you develop and maintain a winning attitude, even during a down turn in performance, these six steps will help maximize your chances of success:

1. *Let go of your ego.* Accept criticism with good spirit and without taking it personally. Remember that when someone criticizes aspects of your athletic performance, he or she does not usually have a malicious intent. Rather than an attack, it may be meant as something constructive. But even if those comments are petty and poisonous, you don't have to take them personally. Don't make them your problem. Respond by saying, "That's something to think about," and move on.

In some instances you may be able to learn a few things from criticism--if you're willing to set aside your ego and respond to the comments objectively. Ask yourself, "How can this help me?" Disassociate yourself from any emotional wounds that the comments could inflict, and process the information for the positive elements it may contain. Take what you can learn from it (if anything) and incorporate it into your athletic program.

Remember, your coach might criticize you only because he or she sees it as a way of helping you improve your game, although if that criticism isn't offered in a constructive way it can be emotionally devastating. Some coaches communicate with athletes only through negative comments, never offering praise. That's a tragedy.

Never allow yourself to become overwhelmed by the negative influence of others. Tough it out. Get a second opinion. Make a concerted effort to surround yourself with people who are positive, who will allow you to reach for your dreams, and who will support you in that effort. Ultimately, let your performance on the playing field speak for itself.

2. *Keep your sense of humor.* Be willing to laugh at yourself. Life really is fun, and so are sports. If you have a particularly disappointing game, find the humor in it. Look for something to laugh about in anything negative that takes place. As one baseball player quipped, "I was very consistent today--consistently bad!"

3. *View change as an opportunity.* Whenever you experience an apparent setback, find a way to reposition yourself and use it to your advantage. Dennis Eckersley was a starting pitcher in the early part of his career, and even became a twenty-game winner. One season, however, his manager moved him to the bullpen, which stunned him. He saw this as a clear demotion. But after the initial shock wore off, he decided to make the most of it. Eckersley went on to become the all-time best closer in baseball history. However, he didn't become great until he made up his mind to view that supposed demotion as an opportunity, not as a slap in the face.

4. *Decide in advance what you want.* Plan ahead as much as possible. How do you want your day to go? What do you need to do today and in the days ahead to move closer to your goals? What's the best way to respond to your coach, teammates, and opponents in various situations? How will you react to victories and defeats when they occur? The more advance planning you do, the better.

5. *Temporary letdowns are normal.* Accept the reality that life and sports have peaks and valleys. Late in his stellar career George Brett clearly learned this fact of life. In his late thirties Brett became one of the oldest baseball batting champions ever. But in the year he won that title, he got off to a terrible start, and performed disappointingly until the All-Star break. But then he caught fire. He really wasn't doing anything differently at the plate; he just kept doing the things that had made him successful in the past. By the time the season ended he had sizzled his way to batting title.

So don't give up. Work through the setbacks. Grow from them. Learn from them. Make adjustments when necessary. Stay focused on your goals and view the letdowns within the context of striving to fulfill your dreams.

6. *Take some time off.* Get away from the training field now and then. Schedule days off. Do something fun, taking your mind off your sport. Perhaps all you need is a breather to see things clearly and begin anew with a fresh outlook.