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CHAPTER FOUR

The ELM Tree of Mastery Toolkit

Resiliency is a key success factor for athletes. Without it, athletes, no matter how talented, are just not going to be successful. Over the course of a season (or a career), athletes must weather storms in the form of injuries, upset defeats, slumps, and illness.

Joan Duda, whose research was highlighted in Chapter 3, says: “Everyone looks at the scoreboard. But you have to have other criteria besides the scoreboard – it is not one or the other. What’s different about athletes who are primarily task-oriented is that they have other ways to keep the boat afloat when things don’t tilt in their direction. The magic of a task focus is the resiliency it provides us...it’s the mortar that holds the bricks together, especially when under attack.”

A mastery orientation (Duda’s “task” focus) helps athletes deal with the inevitable difficult situations they will face. The practical tools in this chapter can help players develop a mastery orientation to serve them throughout their lives.

1 | “Plant and Water” the ELM Tree

Before athletes can internalize the ELM Tree of Mastery, they need to hear it and talk about it, a lot. Help them by planting the seeds early in the season. Jot down some talking points to share with them. For example:

- The Tree of Mastery is an ELM Tree. ELM stands for E for Effort, L for Learning, M for bouncing back from Mistakes.
- Research shows athletes who focus on ELM improve faster and do better on the scoreboard. To be our best, we should focus on ELM.
- If you give your best effort, I’ll be proud of you no matter what the score is.
- Learning requires having a Teachable Spirit. Let’s try to learn something to get better every day.
- Great competitors don’t throw a tantrum when they make a mistake; they reset on the next play and later try to learn from their mistake.
- I want you to play with enthusiasm and be aggressive. It’s okay to make a mistake – the key is to bounce back quickly so you can make the next play.

Once planted, the ELM Tree requires constant watering because the larger sports culture constantly undermines a mastery focus. Media coverage of professional sports focuses almost exclusively on scoreboard winners, ignores great efforts that come up short, shows disdain for those who don’t win, and says in so many ways that the only thing ultimately that matters is winning on the scoreboard. Here are some ways to keep the ELM Tree growing despite the larger sports culture.

- Discuss the ELM Tree during practices and games. Recognize players working hard, learning something new, and bouncing back from mistakes, and use the occasion to reinforce the ELM Tree. Reinforce a Growth Mindset by focusing on their effort whenever they do something right: “Your defense was much improved on Saturday. I see all your hard work is paying off.”
- Before every game, remind your players they will perform better if they focus on the ELM Tree.
- Give your players a “homework” assignment to watch their sport at the college or professional level on television and write down at least one thing they learned that they could try in their own practice.
- Share your commitment to mastery. Talk about books you read, videos you watch, clinics you attend, and the time you expend in planning

practices. If you also talk about how you use the ELM Tree in your regular life, you will help your players think about the ELM Tree in their life outside sports.

2 | Help Players Recover Quickly with a Mistake Ritual

Mistakes are what youth athletes worry about most. Once a player makes a mistake in public (and the playing field, even with few spectators, is very public for youth athletes), they are no longer in the moment. Negative self-talk kicks in, they berate themselves silently for making a mistake, and are usually not ready for the next play.

A mistake ritual is a gesture and statement that coaches and players use to transform the fear of mistakes so they don't play timidly. A mistake ritual allows athletes to quickly "reset" for the next play without beating themselves up for having made a mistake. Here are a few examples Double-Goal Coaches have used successfully:

- **The Flush:** Motion like you're flushing a toilet. "It's okay, Omar. Flush it. Next play."
- **No Sweat:** Wipe two fingers across your forehead as if flicking sweat from your brow. "No sweat. Forget it. Get ready for the next play!"
- **Brush It Off:** Motion as if brushing dirt off your shoulder while yelling, "Brush it off."

Encourage your team to not fear mistakes and discuss what mistake ritual they'd like to use. Urge players to use it with each other whenever a mistake is made.

The power of a Mistake Ritual is well documented. The "flush" helped Louisiana State University win the 2009 NCAA baseball title!

- Ryan Schimpf after hitting a home run in the Super Regional to beat Rice: "I had two terrible at-bats previously, and I just tried to flush it."
- Pitcher Anthony Ranaudo after a bad outing against Virginia: "I just have to be able to flush it mentally and go out there with a new attitude and approach." He then pitched 6 shutout innings to defeat Arkansas in the College World Series.

- LSU Head Coach Paul Mainieri after losing to Texas in the tournament: "This just wasn't our night. We have to flush this loss and come out ready to play for the national championship on Wednesday night" – which they won. And the pitcher who picked up the win in the final game? Frequent flusher Anthony Ranaudo.

Baseball lends itself to mistake rituals, but the tool works in any sport. As a college hockey goalie, PCA's Eric Eisendrath brushed snow away from the posts after goals scored against him to create a mental "clean slate." One youth soccer coach has players pretend to be holding a balloon by a string, and simply let it go by opening their clenched fist.

While we don't want kids to fear mistakes, we also recognize they shouldn't be ignored. It is the coach's responsibility to correct mistakes. That's why having a "Parking Lot" is helpful.

Correcting mistakes immediately after they're made is often not pragmatic (like in the midst of a fast-paced game). Further, the moment after a mistake is not a teachable moment for most youth athletes.

Instead, note the mistake without mentioning it at the time, and "park" it where you will remember it after the game so you can address it. (Chapter 6 offers tips for giving constructive feedback effectively.)

Later you can try to understand why the athlete made the mistake so you can help her improve. Maybe she was never taught the skill adequately. Or maybe she didn't understand what you asked her to do. Maybe the skill is a complex one and, although she understands what you want her to do, she hasn't mastered it physically.

Often, a player can perform an action until fatigued, which opens the floodgates for mistakes late in competitions. Sometimes nervousness causes a player to not execute something he can do easily in practice. Rarely does a player understand what you have asked him to do and intentionally disregard your wishes, although this may happen once in a blue moon. Whatever the reason for the mistake, using a mistake ritual and the Parking Lot helps you get the best from your players.

3 | Make Effort Goals a Part of Your Team Culture

Double-Goal Coaches tap into the enormous power of Effort Goals, which are more under a player's control than outcome goals. Effort Goals motivate because players can control their effort and see their progress. Here are some examples of Effort Goals:

	Effort Goals	Outcome Goals
Baseball/ Softball	· Run hard through first base on a grounder	· Beat the throw to first
Basketball	· Make contact and block out after every shot	· Get the rebound
Lacrosse	· Contest every ground ball	· Gain possession of the ball
Soccer	· Sprint after all 50-50 balls	· Get to the ball first and control it
Football	· Relentlessly pursue the ball until you hear the whistle	· Make the tackle

Effort Goals are great for younger kids and those new to a sport or less skilled. With a timid beginning soccer player, you might set an effort goal for her to contest every ball within 10 feet and get at least five touches in a half. Ask a less skilled basketball player to race back on defense each time and quickly find the person he's guarding.

Effort Goals also work well with older, more seasoned athletes. To get my high school basketball team to drive to the basket, we set an Effort Goal of shooting at least 20 free throws per game. Taking the ball aggressively to the basket often led opponents to foul, putting my players on the line. If we achieved our Effort Goal of 20 free throws in the game, we usually also achieved our outcome goal of winning the game.

Effort Goals that “move the goal posts” can keep teams trying throughout a game or season regardless of the score. My friend Wayne Pinegar once coached a team of U-9 girls in a challenging soccer season. In the opening

minutes of the first game his team scored what turned out to be their only goal of the season.

Wayne developed a set of Effort Goals to keep the team from getting discouraged because they had virtually no chance of winning on the scoreboard. One was to move the ball past the mid-line at least five times in a game.

Well behind near the end of the final game, his players and parents on the sidelines suddenly cheered loudly. Their celebration confused the opposing team and parents – why was the losing team celebrating? The answer, of course, was that it was the fifth time they moved the ball past midfield. When a coach uses Effort Goals, players feel good about their improvement and can continue giving best efforts even when losing by a big margin on the scoreboard. As a postscript, every girl on Wayne's team came out for soccer again the next year, an amazing accomplishment in a zero-win season.

Effort Goals are also useful for talented teams when winning easily. If a team has put the game away early, have players focus on using weak hands or feet, trying a move that they have not yet mastered, or playing new positions. This way Effort Goals challenge a talented team even during runaway victories.

Effort Goals are even more powerful when players set their own. You can “seed” the discussion by suggesting some Effort Goals and asking players to select the ones they'd like to achieve. Have them share their goals with you, their teammates, and/or parents to strengthen their commitment to achieving them.

4 | Improve Performance with Stretch Goals

Stretch Goals improve performance. A Stretch Goal is something you can't do right away, so a stretch is required. Stretch Goals go a little beyond what people think they can do, but are reachable with effort over time. Here are some examples:

- **Basketball:** Improve three-point shot percentage to 40 percent
- **Soccer:** Increase distance of a goal-kick by 10 yards

- **Swimming:** Improve start and turns to drop 5 seconds off 100 free-style time
- **Lacrosse:** Cradle the ball with weak hand high as skillfully as with strong hand
- **Baseball:** Hit outside pitches to the opposite field consistently
- **Football:** Regularly make catches just with hands, not the body

Here's why Stretch Goals work: if we set an ambitious goal, we know instinctively we can't achieve it the old way. We have to try something new or work harder (or both). A Stretch Goal can be a catalyst to learning what it takes to do what we want to do.

The ideal Stretch Goal can become a "Just-Right Challenge," in which athletes are excited to take on a challenge because it feels within reach with some extra effort. When athletes (or anyone) are facing a Just-Right Challenge, motivation is a non-issue. They can't wait to tackle it.

Ask athletes to think of Stretch Goals that are Just-Right Challenges for them. Help them develop a practical, step-by-step plan to achieve them. Have them revisit their Stretch Goals regularly to ensure they aren't discouragingly hard (or boringly easy). Help them adjust goals to be more achievable and motivating, or set new goals when achieved. As with Effort Goals, Stretch Goals are most powerful when players set their own.

Teams can set Stretch Goals as well. When I coached high school girls' basketball, my captains decided to shoot for the Central Coast Section (California) title in our division.

I worried that this goal was too ambitious and almost suggested focusing on winning our league title. But I didn't discourage them from their stretch goal, and we won our league. I believe part of our success was that we set our sights high. If we had set only the lower goal of winning our league, we might well have fallen short of that. The higher, more unrealistic goal actually was more practical.

5 | Maximize Effort By Rewarding Unsuccessful Effort

All coaches reward players who make the play. It sounds crazy, but to maximize team effort, reward players who try hard but *fail* to make the play.

When a player makes the play and is cheered by her coach, she will tend to assume her coach is happy about the outcome, even if the coach stresses the effort involved. So look for great efforts that aren't successful. Then when you praise a player's effort, there is no confusion. You can only be recognizing the player for effort, which sends a message that you notice effort no matter what the outcome.

This tool can transform your own negativity when a player fails to make a play. A coach who understands the power of this tool for building a team of gritty, relentless players will be less disappointed at failure because he will see it as an ideal teachable moment to strengthen his team's habit of effort.

PCA's Tina Syer notes that in field hockey and soccer, wings who stay wide force defenders to cover them, which can leave the striker open. Sometimes a player will run 60 yards down field but not be rewarded with the ball. Tina makes sure to recognize this so they will make this long run to be in the right place in the future. In the absence of recognition, a player may not do this again, especially since it is hard work.

Mike Legarza wanted his college basketball players to drive to the basket aggressively, so he never criticized them for missing a lay-up. I once saw him react to a missed lay-up with, "Great drive, John!" He overlooked the failure to reward the unsuccessful effort.

Opportunities to reinforce unsuccessful effort abound in every sport.

6 | Get Things Done with Targeted Symbolic Rewards

What gets rewarded gets done. What the coach gives attention to gets done because a coach's attention is rewarding to players. Targeted Symbolic Rewards can get athletes to act in helpful ways without undercutting internal motivation, which can happen with external rewards.

After games, recognize players who worked hard or completed unsung activities such as marking opponents on defense or hustling after loose balls. Make sure the reward is “symbolic” (not something of value in and of itself). Here are some examples:

- John Buxton, Headmaster at Culver Academies (IN), gives lollypops to players who do something he wants to see more of, especially effort. He occasionally gives lollypops to players who star in conventional ways (e.g., hitting a home run), but mostly he targets unsung activities that contribute to the team’s success. “Sam, you backed up third on that triple in the fifth inning. That’s the kind of thinking and hustle we need.” Lollypops make post-game conversations something players look forward to.
- Greg Siino, a Roseville (CA) coach, uses the transcontinental railroad to reinforce unsung behavior with “The Golden Spike Award.” He has players visualize a cross-country train ride in which spikes typically go unnoticed, but the train would derail without them holding the rails in place. He gives the award to someone who does something to build the team or support a teammate. He especially looks for players who react maturely to a bad call, who rise above a bad game to help the team, or who do something positive when tired at the end of a game or during conditioning.
- Lisa Christiansen, a coach for the U-19 U.S. world champion women’s lacrosse team, awards a special blue ball at the first practice of the week to the athlete who worked the hardest the previous week, used a new skill successfully in the game or, when it’s rainy, came off the field the muddiest. That athlete gets to use the blue ball all week during drills at the start of practice. This became such a big deal to her players that they won’t allow Christiansen to start practice until she announces the winner for that week.
- Some coaches give out a “Dirty Shirt Award” after each game to the player who shows the grittiest play. Others allow players who showed exemplary hustle or bounced back from a mistake to pick the music for the next practice or wear special practice jerseys that week.

Whatever behavior you want to see more of, create a symbolic reward for it, and you will!



BETTER ATHLETES
BETTER PEOPLE

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