Every Moment Matters: How the World's Best Coaches Inspire Their Athletes and Build Championship Teams (O'Sullivan, John)

It is this consistent excellence that intrigued Zigarelli and led to his 2011 book The Messiah Method: The Seven Disciplines of the Winningest College Soccer Program in America.

I've learned that helping others and seeing them succeed at something is better than it happening to me," then it is, without question, worth all that you do.

If at the end of your career all you can say is, "I was a National Champion, and we won a lot of games," then I'd say it wasn't worth the time or energy. But if you can look back and say, "I learned a lot about myself. I did things I never thought possible, both physically and psychologically. I made the most important and lasting friendships of my life. I've learned that helping others and seeing them succeed at something is better than it happening to me," then it is, without question, worth all that you do.

He will give his seniors a copy of each letter and send them out of the locker room. Then he will read each letter to the remaining players and ask them to go out and compete for their teammates who are playing their final collegiate game. The tears will flow, and a steely resilience will settle across the Carolina team. To date, North Carolina has played in twenty-four national finals. The Tar Heels have won twenty-two of them. Dorrance credits that tremendous winning percentage in the biggest game of the year to those senior letters.

The most approachable book on this topic is Peter Brown's Make It Stick: The Science of Successful Learning. I will not do sufficient justice to this book nor the decades of research in a few paragraphs here, but there are a few concepts that are critical components of sticky learning that we can all apply to our training sessions.

"Faith in focused, repetitive practice of one thing at a time until we've got it nailed is pervasive among classroom teachers, athletes, corporate trainers, and students.

One of the advantages of interleaving your practice is the concept of spacing. The power of spacing your practice, or spaced repetition, has been demonstrated repeatedly in research since 1885, and studies have shown up to 40 percent retention improvement when spacing versus cramming your learning. The basic concept is this: after learning a new skill or idea, learners should give themselves time to forget so that the brain, when presented with this material in the future, must struggle to recall the skills it learned previously.

Force them to struggle to recall what was covered. The optimal timing between practices varies. For material your athletes are less familiar with, shorter spacing is more effective, and where an athlete is more familiar with the material, longer spacing can be more effective. In general, though, the best time to reintroduce a topic is right at the point where they are about to forget it.

The term refers to learning a task with a considerable but not overwhelming amount of struggle. In other words, we want to make learning more challenging, frustrating, and slower in the short term in exchange for long-term gains. When they achieve one level of mastery, we must immediately up the ante and ask them to do a bit more. This type of teaching can be frustrating for athletes as they never seem to actually "get it" in practice. It can be frustrating for parents watching their kids struggle. Yet, the research demonstrates it is far more effective than allowing them to repeatedly accomplish a technique or concept they have already mastered.

First, desirable difficulties require more effort and seemingly slow down apparent gains. They may feel less productive in the moment, but they make learning stronger and more enduring. And second, as we will speak about at the end of this chapter, illusions of mastery can be very attractive for coaches, parents, and even the athletes themselves.

The professors whose students did best in the short term were not nearly as successful at promoting long-term results for those students. As the researchers wrote, "Professors who excel at promoting contemporaneous student achievement, on average, harm the subsequent performance of their students in more advanced classes." One professor, who ranked dead last of the 421 professors in terms of long-term student performance, was ranked sixth overall in student evaluations and seventh in student exam performance. The professors

who promoted a deeper understanding of the material, and actually set their students up for long-term success, were punished on their student evaluations for it.

Learning deeply means learning slowly, and for most learners, it does not feel as though they are learning.

“We can all agree that scenario will not make you stronger or any better at doing squats,” says Ragan. “Stealing the reps does not help in the weight room.” Yet head to most sporting venues and you will see parents and coaches yelling instructions from the sideline—essentially stealing the reps from their athletes. If we can agree this won’t help in the weight room, why do we think stealing reps helps on the sports field?

The brain is like a muscle. We need some struggle to grow; you will not get stronger if all you do is five-pound dumbbell curls day after day. You need to add weight. You need stretch. You need desirable difficulties. It means putting our athletes in the learning zone. If we always intervene and solve problems, we will get short-term improvement but miss out on long-term learning. Growth takes time and patience. We don’t just do one set of push-ups and expect big results. We don’t eat healthy for one meal or one day and realistically expect to lose ten pounds. It takes time, reps, and patience to build a new skill. Progress is slow and steady, and sometimes there are regressions, but if we stick with it long enough, growth happens. We don’t learn by watching someone else do it. To see the results, the athlete needs to do the work, not simply watch others get all the playing time or practice reps. Kids need to get meaningful playing time. Skills are developed by actually doing them, getting the reps in, making mistakes, assessing, and trying again. Every young athlete needs practice reps, and every player needs game time. We can improve any skill if we do the work. Of course, we all cannot master every skill or be the best athlete in our given sport, but everyone is capable of improving. People learn at different rates and at different times, but given enough time and an optimal learning environment, people will eventually learn. It takes focus, effort, and time, but any skill can be learned and improved upon as long as we create an environment that keeps our athletes engaged and with a growth mindset

Renshaw and his colleagues paint a great picture of how to make our sessions more representative. They advocate thinking about a dial with a range of one to ten. The higher the number, the more representative your activity is. Hitting a baseball off a tee may be a one, and hitting a pitch from a Major League pitcher in the bottom of the ninth with two outs and the bases loaded may be a ten. Everything else falls in between. If you rate each activity in your sessions on this dial, you can determine whether the learning is likely to transfer.

Competition should exist to measure progress and see what your athletes have learned. If you do not give them the space to explore and make mistakes, how will you ever know if they have learned something? This does not mean no coaching is allowed, but keep it to a minimum and recognize if your coaching during competition is of the "promoting learning" or the "problem solving" kind.

What went well? What needs work? What did you learn from today that you can work on in practice in order to improve?

Do not replicate the same technical activity fifty times in a row. Instead, mix and match, add defenders, direction, and different constraints that compel athletes to focus—not go to autopilot mode.

Children tend to run across the parking lot and harass their parents to get them to training on time when you play first. And, playing first does wonders to work off the excess energy that tends to come along with young children who have been sitting in a classroom all day and were handed a sugary snack on the drive to training. Plus, they signed up to play the game, and it's easy to make sure that they get plenty of game time when they start and end with some sort of game.

Krashen has found that there are two phases of language learning, acquisition and structure. In the acquisition phase, where learners get a variety of comprehensible input through being immersed in the language or through music and media, the learners gain fluency. Learning is unconscious. Once structure is added and the learners are taught about rules, laws, skills, and techniques, learning becomes conscious. The learners gain accuracy, but the acquisition basically stops. Kroeten equates this to how players learn a dynamic game such as soccer. During the acquisition phase, we want to provide the least amount of structure as possible so the learner will create, try new things, and play without

fear of making a mistake. Later, when we add structure, we can bring about accuracy

The problem is, we all too often focus on structure and accuracy first and then try to coach the creativity back into them later on. It does not work. “When we teach youth sports in this country, we pretty much focus on the rules, laws, skills, and techniques,” says Kroeten, “and we don’t give any time to the joy and love of play. Only in acquisition can we really improve and become fluent. What we have seen is that when kids move out of acquisition to a local super club, they seem to plateau. They have not put enough time in acquisition.”

Kroeten is not opposed to coaching and structure but believes we need more time to let the kids play before adding too much structure and accuracy to their games. In his research, most of the best players have had a lengthy acquisition phase before they have added extensive structure. And that is why we need to create an environment where kids can simply play, both within our practices and by being encouraged to pick up a ball outside of practice. “Acquisition builds fluency, and structure builds accuracy,” says Kroeten.

To feel involved; To have lots of touches of the ball and play small-sided games; To score lots of goals, achieve tasks, and increase fun and enjoyment; To understand winning isn’t crucial, to let everyone play; and To adhere to simple rules.

Lots of fun Loads of touches Stretch (operating on the edge of their comfort zone) Constant decision-making Looks like the game

In order to prepare for both the present and the future of the game, the England Rugby Union staff identified five characteristics that every player should possess and every coach should work to develop: Creativity Awareness Resilience Decision making Self-organization

When the whistle blew, we wanted to win, but it was more than that. We wanted to really prove how hard we work, how tough we are, how much we work together, and how much we love each other. And by doing that, the scoreboard should reflect all that love that we have for each other on the field.” Timchal,

Next, Carroll explained to the assembled crowd that he was inspired by Jerry Garcia, front man for the Grateful Dead. “Jerry Garcia said that he didn’t want his band to be the best ones doing something. He wanted them to be the only ones doing it. To be all by yourself out there doing something that nobody else can touch—that’s the thought that guides me, that guides this program: We’re going to do things better than it’s ever been done before in everything we do, and we’re going to compete our ass off. And we’re gonna see how far that takes us.”1

As Clear writes, “Sisu is a word that has no direct translation, but it refers to the idea of continuing to act even in the face of repeated failures and extreme odds. It is a way of living life by displaying perseverance even when you have reached the end of your mental and physical capacities … It is a type of mental toughness that allows you to bear the burden of your responsibilities, whatever they happen to be, with a will and perseverance that is unbreakable. It is the ability to sustain your action and fight against extreme odds. Sisu extends beyond perseverance. It is what you rely on when you feel like you have nothing left.”

I love this concept of Sisu as it applies to creating a “win the day” culture. How many of our teams want to achieve something great, but we face extremely long odds? That happens all the time. Everyone wants to win at game time on Saturday. But does your team want to win and do the things it takes to be successful six months prior to Saturday, to show up again and again and create such a high standard that the results take care of themselves? This is when we have to find that fire within and create a place where, even on their bad days, our athletes are still competing at a very high level.

Which Visek labeled the “Fun Determinants.” Here are the top six: Trying your best When the coach treats the athlete with respect Getting playing time Playing well together as a team Getting along with your teammates Exercising and being active Further down the list of fun determinants we find a few items that may shock some coaches and parents:

.We can learn a lot from this story and others like it. It is a myth that children develop in a linear fashion. It is messy, and it takes patience to allow athletes to develop on their own schedule. It takes time to ensure that the talent that whispers is allowed to emerge.

‘Julie, that was a great run. Because you made that run, you cleared that defender out of that space. That was a great run, a selfless run. Thank

They also knew that there was no need for a twelve and under national champion to be crowned as this title served the egos of the adults watching far more than the needs of the children playing.

The report concludes that “the top predictors found to influence girls liking or loving their sport are centered around social and mastery aspects of participation and include being with their friends, really liking the coach, not being afraid to try new skills, not being one of the least-skilled players on the team, having goals related to their participation in sports, and perceiving sports as very important in their lives.”2

“The inherent design of dyads discourages competition. To be willing to compete is to be willing to jeopardize a dyad. If that is your reference point for relationships, it isn’t surprising that women need sure things when they compete. Because if competing means risking a relationship with a loved one, you’d better at least know that you’ll come back to that empty home with the trophy in hand. Thus, the lesson of the dyad is that competition destroys relationships

Have identified what they call the PCDEs, or the psychological characteristics of developing excellence. These are “the attitudes, emotions, and desires young athletes need to realize their potential.” The PCDEs they have identified as primary drivers include the following: Motivation Commitment Goal setting Quality practice Imagery Realistic performance evaluations Coping under pressure Social skills Competitiveness Commitment Vision of what it takes to succeed Importance of working on weaknesses Game awareness Self-belief

Coaches need to be stretching mental capacity, teaching athletes how to respond to setbacks, and how to perform under pressure. We need to be teaching our athletes not only technical and tactical skills but equipping them with these PCDEs as well.

Early on, athletes might need the support of parents, coaches, and teachers to reinforce the PCDEs, but as they get older, they must become intrinsically motivated to develop them.

“Children become the messages they hear the most.”

This excited the company CEO, who was confident that its five strategic priorities were well known as they had not changed in years; and, in her mind, they were well communicated. Yet when the researchers asked the company leadership to list the five priorities, only 25 percent of the managers could list three of the five. One-third of the leadership, the very people charged with implementing company strategy, could not list a single one. These same researchers analyzed 124 additional organizations and once again found that only 28 percent of the top managers could list three of the five organizational priorities.3 The takeaway is this: whatever your team or organization values must be communicated relentlessly. You cannot over-communicate those values. Stop assuming people know and assume that they don’t know. I

“If you are not really proactive in working to create the culture that you want your team to have, the culture may develop in a way you really don’t want it to.” I

Well done is better than well said. Be hungry and humble. Never take a play off.

And this is part of the process. This is the Way of Champions. We come up short, and we learn. We win, and we learn. We continue to build an unbreakable spirit and bond. Every game, every week, our bond must continue to grow, and our love for each other must continue to get stronger. It is that spirit that we must bring to every game, to play in the now and to burn inside us, knowing that we can stand toe to toe with the best teams in the country and give them everything they can handle.

Your values and shared purpose are important when you are winning, but they are even more important when you are losing. They tell you that you are on the right track. They keep you focused on the process and the controllables. And they give you a better way to determine if you are progressing than simply looking at the scoreboard.

You must establish an identity and way of doing things in your own little kingdom.

Cultural architects are athletes who ask themselves, “What can I give?” to the team. They come from a place of service and believe things such as: I can give my best effort in practice and games. I can give my team a positive attitude, no matter what the circumstances. I can give my team a boost, no matter how many minutes I play. I can give my team a better chance to win, no matter what position I play. I can do the dirty work so my teammate can score the goal and get the glory. I can sacrifice my personal ambitions for the betterment of the group. I can lead by example. I can be an example of our core values in action.

Cultural assassins often bring an attitude of “What can I get?” to the team. In our self-centered world of selfies, Instagram, and a popular culture that says “look at me” every chance it gets, far too many athletes become cultural assassins. They want to know how they can Get to start; Get more playing time; Get to play their favorite position; Get to score all the points/goals; Get to work hard when they want to; Get to show up (physically and mentally) when they feel like it; Get to give less than their best because they are an upperclassman; and Get attention as the star player.

As a coach, I used to think that the most important thing was to have my best players be my hardest workers. But now I realize that isn’t enough. Being a hard worker can still be a selfish pursuit. I now believe the most important thing as a coach is to have cultural architects that ask, “What can I give?”

But recognition is something that coaches have a lot of control over, and if they are intentional about it, they can make sure every athlete is a contributor and knows that she plays an important role.

The awards are as follows: Playing with Passion Award Best Impact Award (for a non-starter) Rise to the Occasion Award The Austin Hatch Grit and Persistence Award The Darby Maggard Attitude of Gratitude Award How has changing the awards gone? Attendance at the award dinners is way up. Anticipation over which compelling athletic contribution will win is through the roof. More athletes are engaged and contributing because they know that they can be recognized, even if they are not the star player.

Taking James’s advice, I sat the girls down for twenty minutes before my first practice and asked them to give me some adjectives that describe a great

teammate. They asked me what an adjective was, so I taught that first. And then they were on a roll. “Hard worker!” “Positive!” “Caring!” “Not afraid of mistakes!” “Focused!” they shouted out, and I wrote them down. Once we had compiled our list, I had them all sign the bottom of the paper, where it said, “I commit to being the type of teammate described above.” I signed it, too. On the next page is that team values sheet: “This is who we have all agreed to be when we come

“Every practice I will pick one of these values to highlight. I don’t care if you make a mistake or miss a pass or a shot. Just be this type of teammate, and we will get better every day.” I then snapped a photo of the paper and sent it to all their parents, telling them the same thing and encouraging them to ask their daughter about the value of the day on the ride home from practice

The five values were as follows: Fun: we must enjoy ourselves and love what we are doing. Unity: we all work hard and compete every day together. Commitment: the willingness to do all the little things needed to be great. Sportsmanship: we respect our teammates, opponents, coaches, officials, parents, the game, and the opportunities it gives us. Accountability: we are all willing to be responsible to ourselves and our teammates.

Why does our organization exist? What are we teaching? How do we define winning? How do we define losing? What are the characteristics of the ideal player? What are the characteristics of the ideal coach? What are the characteristics of the ideal parent? If the organization could accomplish one thing, what would it be? What do we want for our children? How do we have fun here?

In order to establish your DNA, you must Establish your core values, which will become the foundation of your DNA. Create a Shared Purpose Statement, a consistent phrase or reminder to go on your locker room walls and on your training shirts. Relentlessly communicate your values and assume that people do not know what they are—instead of assuming everyone is crystal clear. Promote your cultural architects, eliminate your cultural assassins, and shine a light on the people who bring it every day. Reward the things you value most by rewarding your values and not just your MVPs. Try the twenty-minute or ninety-minute core values activities with your team. If needed, take a quick DNA test for your team or club and learn what matters most.

What if every single one of your athletes would turn up, make a decision, and commit to it 100 percent and were able to review both their commitment and their decision, what do you think would happen to your team, your play, and your athlete?' And everyone would say, 'My God, Mark, everything would go through the roof; it would be fantastic if that happened.' And I say, 'That's interesting. How much time have you invested in you becoming effective at that and how much time do you spend identifying that in the training session and working on it?'

A rule is a regulation or guideline while a standard is a level of quality. Rules can be demeaning in a way, as they are all about control, while standards can be inspiring. When young athletes encounter rules, they constantly test them to see how far they can go before they are held accountable for breaking them. Standards, on the other hand, are something to be strived for and attained. They result in stretch as athletes hold each other accountable for reaching higher, instead of sinking to the level of a rule.

In a nutshell, rules have a negative connotation—don't break me or else—while standards are far more positive: live up to me, and you will be your best self.

In my research, the best programs seem to have as few rules as absolutely necessary and as many standards as they are capable of holding each other accountable for.

"Excellence is accomplished through the doing of actions, ordinary in themselves, performed consistently and carefully, habitually compounded together, added up over time." High standards might not make you popular with everyone, but they will eventually attract the right kind of players and help you build the right type of program.

and their unparalleled success can be traced to a statement that encapsulates that standard: "Better people make better All Blacks."

On the bottom of the screen, the caption reads, "The legacy is more intimidating than the opposition."

Then I read Switch: How to Change Things When Change Is Hard by brothers Chip and Dan Heath, and it altered how I went about my work.

Instant gratification almost always defeats long-term thinking.

The Heaths recommend a three-step approach: Direct the Rider: Provide crystal-clear direction and information since what looks like resistance to change is often a lack of information and clarity. We do this by pointing out our bright spots—our athletes who are upholding or exceeding our standards—and use them as examples. We also do this by setting goals and providing examples of what excellence looks like. Motivate the Elephant: Since the Rider cannot force the elephant in any direction for very long, we must engage people emotionally and get their Elephants to cooperate. People don't fail to change because they are lazy; they are usually exhausted from the effort and give up. We motivate the Elephant by helping our athletes find that feeling change brings about and breaking the journey down into manageable and measurable steps. Shape the Path: Often, it is not the people involved but the environment that prevents behavior change. When you shape the Path, you make change more likely to happen, regardless of what is happening with the Rider or the Elephant. We shape the Path by providing core values that lead to great daily habits and then constantly raising that standard in pursuit of excellence.4

Along with focus and competitiveness, the Rule of Three is one of my current team's non-negotiables, the three things that every player is responsible for and willing to be held accountable for at every practice and game. It is a simple framework that helps us as coaches create that athlete-centered environment that we want to create by giving players a pathway to hold each other accountable. And although Bennett calls it the Rule of Three, it is truly a set of standards to be upheld. Rule One: Each player commits to excellence, which, in the words of Bennett, means, "Being the best I can with the tools I have in the present moment." It is the requirement of every player to be fully present, aware, and focused, to commit 100 percent to their choices in the game and then review those choices and their commitment level. It sounds simple enough, but it can be tough.

Rule Two: This is about teammates holding each other accountable for effective communication

but communication is effective only if it has the desired impact." Once you have agreed on what acceptable, unacceptable, and exceptional look like for a session, your team must agree that if one of them sees a teammate falling below the standard for too long, they will hold that teammate accountable.

"Great communication is done in a way that allows someone to accept your feedback," says Bennett. "If someone's reaching out to you to give you feedback, they're doing it because they want to help you get better, so you must accept it.

Rule Three kick in, and the coach intervenes.

I would say that the ability to be fully aware and focused and be able to self-correct and help your teammates adjust might be one of the most important skills you ever teach them.

Great programs have standards to be aspired to—not a lot of rules to be adhered to. They have the minimum number of rules needed in order to promote the health and well-being of their athletes and the maximum number of standards that they are willing to be held accountable for. In order to create a culture of standards, not rules, you can L

If scoring a goal will result in a win for the team, the success ratio for shooters is 92 percent. If missing the shot will result in a loss for the team, the success ratio drops to 62 percent. Remember, these are professional athletes, yet there is a massive improvement when the situation is perceived as a challenge (if I make it we win) versus a threat (if I miss we lose).

And one of the most important things we can do as a coach is to help our athletes reappraise their stress and anxiety from a threat to a challenge.4 And it's not that hard to do either.

The research is demonstrating that training ourselves to reappraise our interpretation of our arousal state is more effective.

Half of the participants in the study were taught that their physiological responses, such as an increased heart rate or sweaty palms, predicted better

performance on the test. They were taught to embrace these sensations as signs that their body was prepared for the task ahead. On the practice exam, participants who were taught to reappraise their responses outperformed those students in the control group who were not taught to do so.

Three months later, when these same students took the actual GRE, the appraisal group again outperformed the control group and reported that their feelings of arousal on test day aided their performance.

Not only are speakers who are taught to reappraise their arousal in a positive manner more focused and effective in their speaking but they also return physiologically to their baseline state faster than those who are not taught to reappraise their feelings.5

So how do we help our athletes reappraise their stress? The answer is surprisingly simple. First, we can teach them that the responses they are feeling are actually the body's way of saying, "This is an important moment for me. I care about this! That tingling in my arms is my nerves getting primed for activity. These are not signs that there is impending doom; they are signs that this matters to me, and that is a great thing." Second, according to Harvard researcher Allison Wood Brooks, when your athletes encounter a stressful situation and they feel the litany of physiological responses, such as butterflies, sweaty palms, or nervous shakes, they need to reappraise that feeling into one of excitement and opportunity instead of threat. In her studies of public speakers, karaoke singers, and math students, participants who reappraised their feelings as excitement performed better.

As Brooks writes in her research, "Imagine that anxiety and excitement are like the bass and treble knobs on a stereo. By reappraising anxiety as excitement, it seems individuals turn the excitement knob up, without necessarily turning the anxiety knob down." Those three words help the body and mind switch from threat to challenge mode, help increase cardiac efficiency, and help take the focus off the potential negative consequences of the situation

RIVER is an acronym that we use to help coaches remember that athletes need the following things from us in order to feel confidence and belonging with our groups. And in typical Jerry Lynch fashion, each letter has a double meaning:

Relevant and Remarkable: Our job as coaches is to help our athletes feel relevant, that they have a role and are important to this group. Whether they are a starter or barely play a minute, they must know that you see them. This makes them feel remarkable and unique. Important and Inspired: Great coaches inspire their athletes to reach for new heights and hold them accountable for standards, not necessarily rules. They make their athletes realize they are important members of this group, and if they do not meet the standards, they are not just disappointing the coach; they are letting down the team. Validation and Value: The coach sees the contribution of each individual and values what the athlete is able to bring to the team. Great coaches make athletes feel invaluable without being the most valuable. Empowerment and Excited: The athlete feels excited to show up because Coach is excited and passionate about this team and puts the required energy and emotion into practices and games. This empowers our athletes to take more ownership and be more accountable. Revered and Respected: The coach treats the athlete with the respect and dignity he deserves as a human being. The athlete feels revered by her coach and goes all out.

Today, I am highly aware of the sacred trust I have been granted to guide my athletes, and if given one wish from a genie, I would not wish to win a national title. I would wish that these athletes in front of me could feel, deep down, how special and unique this time together is and also how fleeting. I would wish that they could be present in every moment and devour every second. Because being on the athlete's journey and being part of a team in pursuit of something one could never achieve on your own, with people you love, is the greatest feeling in life.