

On the Firing Line (Twenty-eighth in a series)

Great Expectations

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**Give it up,
And it will come to you.**

Her face showed joy, excitement, and a deep quiet confidence. As Sasha Cohen took the ice at the 2006 Winter Olympics for her original (short) program, you knew that this was going to be a very special performance. Indeed it was! She had the performance of her life!

Two nights later, as she prepared to skate her long program, her face showed something completely different. With a razor-thin lead and her lifelong goal within grasp, Sasha's face showed tension, nervousness, anxiousness, and possibly a hint of fear. It was clear that this performance was in jeopardy. Her very first jump resulted in a fall, and her second one nearly ended the same way. Only her hands on the ice prevented a second fall. Now missing many critical points, it was clear to her that gold, and possibly any medal at all, was now beyond her reach that night. She gathered herself and skated beautifully from that point on. Because of the strength of her performance after the falls, and falls on the part of some of the other competitors, Sasha earned the silver medal.

A couple of important lessons may be learned from Sasha's performances those evenings. One lesson is that a competition is not over until the rules and officials say it is over. If Sasha had given up after her miscues, she would have walked away without any prize. Instead, she toughed it out. She dug deep inside herself and never gave up. Not on herself and not on the competition. Anyone who comes away with an Olympic medal has accomplished something very special!

The main lesson of this story is the primary topic of this article. Expectations are a very normal part of sport and competition. Yet expectations are one of many aspects of outcome that we cannot directly control. Did Sasha expect to win? Given how tightly bunched the scores were, that is doubtful. Yet she carried the burden of so many expectations – from herself, from her coaches, the media, and many others – that it affected her mental and emotional state as she took the ice for the final program. Of course, without speaking with her, one cannot possibly know all of the thoughts and feelings she had at that time. Also, the fact that she had to wrap her leg and was flirting with possible injury certainly could have been a factor as well. She is hard working and wonderfully talented, so I suspect we haven't seen the last chapter in her skating career!

We are human beings with blood pumping through our body and with thoughts and hopes and dreams and fears and goals and desires running through our mind and heart. We don't invest a decade or more of our life to a pursuit without hope of someday winning the big prize. Yet, it is these expectations that often stand in the way of reaching our goals.

Almost anyone can learn the mechanics of a sport. They can learn the equipment, how to adjust it, the procedures and moves, refine them, and approach a decent level of performance in training. Many go on to a very high level of performance in training. Yet the essence of sport is the journey of learning how to perform at a very high level – when we care about the outcome! This adds an entirely new and tricky dimension to the game.

It is funny how things work. To determine the winner in many sports, we add up the points and the high score wins. This is true of shooting, archery, basketball, and many other

sports. In some cases, we use reverse or low score as in golf. In still other sports it is the fastest time (skiing, running) or greatest distance (high jump, long jump, ski jumping, and others). Regardless, there is some measure that we use to determine the winner.

Paradoxically, how we go about performing, and thus winning, is quite different from how we determine the winner. In order to get the score we have to perform certain actions, moves, or maneuvers. These are often quite unrelated to the actual measure used to determine the winner. It is this difference that allows expectations to degrade our performance.

Activities in the class known as “complex sensorimotor tasks” are best performed when the activity has been well and properly rehearsed and when the body and deeper parts of the mind are allowed to manage and control the performance. Golf, shooting, and archery are three examples of this type of activity.

Yet, all our life we are taught to “pay attention” and “take control” whenever the outcome is important to us. Therefore it is only natural that, when we really care about posting a good score or winning a competition, we use the active thought part of our mind and attempt to micro-manage the performance. While this works well for certain kinds of tasks, such as doing mathematics work, it is completely the wrong approach for complex sensorimotor tasks. Instead, we need to “back off” and get the active thought part of our mind (and our ego) to give up control (or more correctly, give up the illusion of being in control) and allow the body and deeper parts of the mind to manage the process. When the active thought part of the mind exerts control, the performance suffers – often fatally.

We need to learn and develop the ancient oriental technique of compartmentalization. Simply stated, we need to separate “outcome” from “performance” (or “result” from “doing”) in our mind. Outcome is something over which we cannot exert direct control. Therefore we cannot ensure the outcome. Yet we so often “take control” (or so we think) in an attempt to ensure the outcome! We need to realize that outcome is beyond our direct control, and that our performance, that is how we go about doing the activity, is directly under our control. We can reject the shot if it is not unfolding properly. We can calm our mind and “just shoot” as so many people say. One of the first keys to doing this is separating outcome from performance in our own mind. Until the competition is completed, outcome is just more baggage that will degrade our performance unless we leave it outside the range.

Does this always work the way we want it to? Of course not. Just like any other technique or skill, it comes through training. Make up your mind to separate outcome from performance in your thinking. Make up your mind to reject the shot when you catch yourself trying to actively control the shot or even when you notice you are thinking about score or any other aspect of outcome. Continuing the shot in those circumstances is a far greater error than if you feel some physical error and don’t reject. It is that subtle and that powerful. Be patient with yourself and the process. After all, you didn’t get to your current level of performance in just one day.

One of the critical elements is to totally relinquish control. Give it up! The active thought part of your mind – the one with the ego and the little voices – will scream and you will fight yourself to do this. It may be quite challenging to relinquish control. The vast majority of the athletes who are at the very top of this game, and who stay there year after year, all shoot this way. Yes, there are always exceptions. However, their journey is generally longer, harder, and the results are usually less sustainable. Dare yourself to get outside your comfort zone and experience a whole new dimension of performance!

The “On The Firing Line” series is published by the national governing bodies for Olympic shooting in Japan and the USA, and has been adapted for archery as “On the Shooting Line” published by USA Archery. Olympic Coach Magazine, the National Association of Soccer Coaches, and others have referenced selected articles. The entire series is available online at www.pilkguns.com.

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(Biographical information as of October 2009)