

Icing Down Burnout

By Jim Meier

Burnout is common among young athletes. The primary cause for burnout is year-round participation in one particular sport. As coaches, parents and athletes it is important to understand the symptoms and signs of burnout as well as how to effectively deal with this issue.

First, I strongly believe that high performance; happiness and success come from three core elements:

BELIEF IN SELF
REALLY WANT IT
DO THE WORK

These elements form the foundation that supports other skills, raw talent and experience. Having worked with a wide variety of people in sports and business for more than 30 years, I have seen this belief reinforced consistently. These are great qualities to have, like any strength; they can become weaknesses when overused. When this happens, burnout is setting in or has already done so.

Let's take this apart to better understand, prevent and deal with burnout. Think about this as a mental ice pack for treating burnout – much like you apply ice to an injury to prevent swelling or soreness.

Our trusty Webster's dictionary tells us the definition of burnout is: "To stop burning because of lack of fuel...to come to nothing," – like a baker who makes sourdough bread but is unable to make more because he has used up all the sourdough starter. He's gone empty.

With athletes, burnout means physical, psychological or emotional exhaustion. The athlete feels spent or empty and seems to have a lack of fuel. This will more often occur in athletes who are really driven – those who work, train and practice very hard and very often. (Again, these are super qualities unless they are overdone). There is a razor-thin line between commitment, over-commitment and self-coercion. It is at that crossroads where the sport the athlete loves ceases to be fun.

I recently spent a few hours with a pitcher; call him Pat, dealing with just this point. Pat said, "Playing isn't much fun anymore. Going to practice, training or even playing the games is like having a 25-pound weight in my shoe." That's a pretty heavy feeling. He was describing burnout.

Fortunately, for most personalities like Pat's, this is a slow occurrence that provides time to apply the mental ice pack. Providing assistance requires recognizing physical and mental symptoms such as:

Physical symptoms:

- significant and continual fatigue
- getting sick/ill more readily than usual
- lackluster performance(s)
- difficulty in bouncing back from setbacks

Mental symptoms:

- feeling our commitments control us
- negative thinking dominates the positive
- uncommon negative reactions/behaviors: irritability, testiness, moody, anger
- detachment from friends and family
- confusion/loss of purpose and energy about the sport (and perhaps other things)

There are other symptoms, but the ones listed above are the most common.

OK, so you are aware that one or more of the symptoms above exists, and they persist. Well, the solution is not as simple as taking a day or two off.

How to Handle Symptoms of Burnout

Coaches:

1. Sharpen your ability to understand, see and address burnout in your athletes and yourself.
2. Increase your ability to assess personality differences in each athlete.

Really think about your players as individuals, realizing that burnout can occur at different thresholds.

Plan for and build in activities, including practice time, that are just plain fun. This can provide a real energy boost. In addition, it creates the potential for breakthroughs in teamwork, game strategies, new plays and seeing the sport with fresh eyes.

Note: Studies of kids in grade school through high school clearly show that the leading reason they leave a sport and sports in general is because it wasn't fun. You don't have to be a comic, clown, magician or wizard, but you should understand that the world is replete with examples of successes resulting from lightening up, relaxing the atmosphere and sometimes simply just taking time off.

Parents:

1. Know your child, pay attention to what he or she is saying (or not saying about their sport), really listen and ask useful, non-threatening questions
2. Become more aware about burnout, especially if your child is really driven. Give support and let your child know that playing is his or her choice and decision.
3. Look for positive aspects regarding practice, training and competition and _tell your child what you saw with specific detail

Note: Ensure that what you say is real, that your words are authentic. There is no room for false positives.

Athletes:

1. Play because you want to and choose to.
2. Unless you are actually practicing, training, competing or doing mental exercises that are part of your routine, let go of the sport.

Note: This doesn't mean that you shouldn't talk about it, read about it or tune into sports on the TV or radio. It does mean that if you do, relax and enjoy being a spectator.

Stay committed to your sport while also balancing your commitment to academics, family, friends and other chosen activities. Be and remain a well-rounded person.

Focus on the pure joy of playing and let the results happen. The 2002 Winter Olympics had a wonderful example of this in gold medal figure skater Sara Hughes.

Give yourself energy by giving thanks for the gifts of sight, touch, hearing, taste, smell and movement

ABOUT JIM MEIER – (He will be one of our speakers at the 2006 BCA Convention in St. Louis, MO)

Jim Meier is the president of the Training and Consulting Connection. He trains players, coaches and parents (in support of their children) about the mental side of sports in one-on-one, small group and team settings. He has worked with professionals, college and high school teams. His background includes extensive study and teaching in the concepts of winning psychology. He has more than 30 years of experience in consulting, coaching and training and is the author of a two-day course and numerous short sessions regarding the mental game. Jim can be reached at (402) 393-1998 or by e-mail at meier@tccomaha.com