

It's Not Just Words: 10 Smart Word Choices of Smart Athletes

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A few weeks ago, I was counseling parents of an athlete at my gym. According to the parents, the daughter was considering "quitting" gymnastics because she believed that she was "sacrificing" too much to do the sport.

"What do you mean by sacrificing?" I asked.

"I mean she sacrifices so much. You know, normal teenage things like time with friends and Saturday afternoons at the mall," one parent explained.

"Well," I responded thoughtfully, "I don't know that I would use the word 'sacrifice' to describe your daughter's choice in how she is spending her time."

"Oh, whatever, it's just words," the other parent insisted.

But here's the thing: It is not just words.

Words are how people think. So, the words we choose are critical in shaping how we think about our lives.

Additionally, when we use words that represent concepts like "quitting" or "sacrificing," the words we use are windows into what we believe to be important and how we understand our role and responsibility in our values, like pursuing excellence.

Finally, and most relevant to this story, whatever words we chose influence those who hear them. If parents keep reinforcing to their child that her pursuit of excellence in a sport is a sacrifice their child is making instead of a decision she is making, what effect is that likely to have on the child's attitude?

These parents are not alone in their struggle to use the best word choices to help their child form a positive attitude and work ethic. As I started to think of all of the variants of this conversation I have had over the years, I came up with a list of 10 word choices one might consider.

Hint: The best of the best always choose the second option.

1. Sacrifice vs. Choice.

'Sacrifice' refers to giving something up for the betterment of others, not for oneself. (It also smacks of a victim mentality, as if what one is doing is something being done to them). We are talking about sports here, not building water wells in remote Africa or feeding caring for lepers in a remote colony. Choice is a word that comes from a place of power. To be the best

of the best, an athlete chooses to go to practice instead of playing video games all afternoon or attending every high school football game. Michael Hyatt calls this a shift in the language of duty to the language of privilege.

2. Pressure vs. Drive.

Pressure comes from an external force; drive comes from within. It is seldom one sees a great athlete who shrinks in the face of what is commonly referred to as pressure. Why? Because the best of the best don't experience pressure as pressure; instead, what they experience is drive -- that force that propels them to focus on their own excellence to the exclusion of all distractions, including what their competitors are doing.

3. Failure vs. Setback.

Things don't always work out. Is it a fiasco or just an obstacle? The best of the best look at failure as feedback or a setback, not as a catastrophe or the end of the road.

4. Short-term vs. Long-term goals.

While short-term goals are useful in urging motivation in spurts, successful athletes and their parents have a long-eye view for goals. A rough workout, meet or even season does not necessarily indicate a reason to change course if the general direction of the plan is still a positive one. The best of the best remember to see the forest through the trees.

5. Criticism vs. Coaching.

Is a coach's tough-to-hear words a personal insult or a bad score or game a diatribe on one's value as a human being? Or are these both pieces of feedback for an athlete to consider and decide how to incorporate into training or competing moving forward? I am certain you can guess which approach the best of the best athlete takes!

6. Tragedy vs. Disappointment.

There is a difference between a tragedy and a disappointment. What happened when terrorists flew planes in to the World Trade Center or a child being struck with a terminal illness are examples of tragedies. Not getting moved up to level 7 or making the all-star team are not tragedies, they are disappointments. The best of the best keep these things in perspective.

7. Difficulty vs. Challenge.

When a person comes to something that takes more effort than is typical or has a shortcoming that places them at a competitive disadvantage, it can be classified as a difficulty or a challenge. A difficulty means the task is "hard to do," whereas a challenge means that it is "a stimulating task or problem." People who are working toward being the best of the best see these moments or faults as challenges, not difficulties. They rise to fight them and find that struggle motivating and exciting. Any Paralympian is a testament to this word choice.

8. Competition vs. Motivation.

Too often, I've seen a family become upset when there are accomplished athletes within the same program. The green-eyed monster rears its ugly head and can send that family packing because the "competition" during practice or for playing time is too much. What they fail to understand is that to be the best of the best, it is ideal to have the motivation of other

excellent athletes with similar goals in your training group or team. The best of the best are not only unafraid to train with the "competition," they know that together, they will push each other to work harder and be better.

9. Winning vs. Celebrating.

While winning certainly feels great, the best of the best focus on celebrating when they achieve their goals independent of the outcome. I've seen some of my best gymnasts have mediocre meets and walk away with gold medals. In turn, I've watched them have incredible meets and place lower on the podium. The best of the best are actually less pleased with those gold medals, favoring the accomplishment of their personal goals. In a team sport, the best of the best are far less concerned with scoring titles or being named as MVPs and are singularly focused on making their team champions.

10. Quit vs. End.

Quitting is giving up in the middle of something. Ending is deciding something no longer suits you and that it is time to move on. Successful athletes don't quit, but may choose to end either by retiring or reinventing themselves through how they approach the game (i.e. Kobe Bryant's transition from leading the league in scoring to working on increasing his assists), by transitioning to a different sport (i.e. gymnasts who transition to diving, dance or any other number of sports) or taking the skills and attitudes honed in the pursuit of being a high level athlete and applying them to school or a career. (Fun fact: 95% of Fortune 500 executives participated in high school sports). At some point or another athletes will retire; retiring is not quitting, it's ending. Please, please, please, if you take no other piece of advice from this article, take this one and do not use the word "quit" to refer to your athlete when he or she ends or retires from a sport or activity.

As the great writer on success Napoleon Hill wrote, "Think twice before you speak, because your words and influence will plant the seed of either success or failure in the mind of another."

Once I spoke with these parents, I had a much better understanding why their daughter felt so put upon in having to be at the gym: she was of the mindset that she was making a sacrifice instead of a choice. I understood that her family's use of the word "quit" rather than a discussion of whether it was time to make a transition (end) or to retire from the sport was causing further anxiety.

After a good discussion with both the parents and the athlete, we came up with a plan to check in after a month to see how the gymnast was feeling about things.

Just the other day, I ran into the athlete and asked her when she would like to set our next meeting. She told me that once she understood that she was making a choice to be at the gym, she felt better about her decision and felt good about where she was at the moment. She wasn't ready to retire. In short, no meeting was needed.

Words have power. Choose them carefully.