

The Bare Essentials: Three Things Every Athlete Needs to Succeed

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Elite performance is determined by a number of factors, amongst them innate talent and genetics, hours of deliberate training, coaching, and luck. But performance is also greatly affected by what is between an athlete's ears: mindset. *An athlete's state of mind is perhaps the single greatest factor that affects performance.*

In his great book [The Inner Game of Tennis: The Classic Guide to the Mental Side of Peak Performance](#), author W. Timothy Gallway writes the following equation:

$$\text{Performance} = \text{Potential} - \text{Interference}$$

What Gallway means is that an athlete will perform up to his potential (the combination of innate talent, training hours, playing hours, coaching) minus all the things that interfere with that potential, namely a poor state of mind.



Here at the Changing the Game Project, our goal is to help every athlete play his or her best. Some may have the potential to be elite, and others just need to develop a mindset and lifestyle that promotes activity for life. As coaches, we are developing the next generation of fans as well as athletes. If you are the coach or parent of any level of budding sportsman, from beginner to expert level, you play a significant role in your athlete's state of mind. Our job as adults in youth sports is to strip away as much interference as possible, and let our athletes compete to the best of their abilities.

In a recent conversation with York University Sport Scientist Dr. Joe Baker, we were discussing the qualities that all high-performing athletes share. In his opinion (and I agree wholeheartedly), at the bare minimum there **are three qualities that every athlete needs** in order to strip away the interference. These factors are so significant, in fact, that I would go as far as saying that without them, **there is no chance your young athlete will ever perform at his or her very best.** They are:

1. **Intrinsic Motivation:** Baker calls intrinsic motivation the “*currency of athletic performance.*” If your child does not have it, not only is it very hard to instill, but your athlete will never have the drive, grit and mental fortitude to train and play hard enough. I see many parents who are the ones leading the charge when it comes to going to training, doing extra work on the side, and finding opportunities for the athlete to challenge himself and get out of his comfort zone.
2. **Enjoyment:** for some reason, there are a number of misguided coaches and parents who think that competitive sports and enjoyment are mutually exclusive, They are not. In fact, if an athlete does not love her sport, if she does not enjoy the experience, she will never hang around long enough to be good. This does not mean that every single moment has to be pleasurable, as I know many top athletes who might not consider conditioning training to be enjoyable. But the experience, taken as a whole, must be fun, it must keep them coming back, and it must be something they look forward to doing. As I tell coaches of young players, if you instill a love of the game, if all your players want to play again next year, you have already accomplished more than most!
3. **Autonomy:** Your athlete must have ownership over his or her sports experience. The goals pursued must belong to them. As coaches and parents, we can suggest some goals and encourage athletes to aim higher, but ultimately we must release them to their game, and their goals. They have to drive the bus, and we must be the passenger who helps them find the way. We can encourage, we can push them and hold them accountable for their ambitions and dreams, but ultimately, if it is you and not your kids in the driver's seat, the trip will be a short one.

No matter how much talent your athlete has, no matter what level of coaching he or she receives, or how many championships that team has won, without intrinsic motivation, enjoyment, and autonomy, your athletes will never play long enough, train hard enough, and be gritty enough to become an athlete who performs up to his or her potential.

How do you know if your aspiring athlete has these three things?

To ensure your child has **autonomy**, ask yourself whether you are saying things like “we struck out ten batters today” or “we scored three goals?” If you are speaking of your child’s athletic achievements as *ours* instead of his or hers, it is a good sign you have not let them go and let the game belong to them. Have you done **goal setting** with your child, and then accepted his goals for sports? If you have completely different goals and ambitions for your kids in sports, they will never have the autonomy needed to succeed.

As far as **enjoyment** goes, there is a huge popular misconception that competitive and fun cannot happen at the same time, and this could not be further from the truth. The only way to compete, to do the monotonous training and other things that it takes to be elite, is through innate enjoyment of the sport. Look to see if your athletes are smiling and laughing, and looking forward to training. Do you ask them “are you having fun?” Do they carry their ball around, looking to play outside of practice? Do they want to get their early or stay late? If yes, that is a good sign that the experience is an enjoyable one.

With both autonomy and enjoyment in place, your athlete has a much better chance of being **intrinsically motivated**. Is he the one jumping out of bed to go to early training, or do you drag him out of bed? If he is asking “can I skip practice” and “do we have to go” all the time, chances are his motivation is lacking. As Dr. Baker mentioned above, if a child does not have intrinsic motivation, is it very hard to give it to him, so a parent or coach must be very cognizant that the athlete is driving the bus, not the adult.

The good news is once your athletes have autonomy, enjoyment and intrinsic motivation to compete, they will have the mindset needed to play up to their potential. Genetics, hours of training, great coaching and luck all play a part, but without a high-performing state of mind, those things lose their luster no matter how much talent an athlete has.

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