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The Unconscious Fear of Success

By BRUCE C. OGILVIE

Research into the potential negative factors associated with high-level athletic performance is now being conducted in many parts of the world. Most of the valuable psychological insights into the emotional constituents that influence athletic achievement are based upon depth studies of a select number of individuals who have sought counseling. This paper explores a number of the major psychological reactions to high-level athletic competition. The subjects who have contributed to our knowledge about the negative emotional reactions to athletic success represent members of the U.S. Olympic Team, professional athletes, and athletes from every major college sport.

The success-phobia syndrome has a number of common elements, each of which individually or all of which collectively could produce emotional re-

actions to inhibit or interfere with top physical efficiency. It is not implied that this psychological block can be reduced to only a few major aspects, but these aspects represent the range of typical reactions with which the authors have had clinical experience. It is not the intent of this paper to suggest that these emotional reactions are in any way mutually exclusive. It has been our finding that one of them will have the central role in determining the form that failure will take.

The typical human reactions of the athletically gifted male to the severe stress of physical excellence have been found to be related to the following causal factors. Each of these has been found to be a direct reflection of parental training and of other environmental influences. Success can breed the following syndromes:

- A. a growing sense of social and emotional isolation
- B. guilt feelings about self-assertion or overt suggestion
- C. the habitual use of rationalization to protect the athlete from having to face the reality of his true physical potential
- D. unconscious feelings of resentment as a reaction to exaggerated external demands for excellence (usually by a parent)
- E. an unconscious fear of old traditions or old idols; an unconscious fear with regard to sup-

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porting the emotional weight of success or being the record-holder.

Each of these characteristic responses to athletic stress has its basis in specific forms of social learning. All are the products of parental attitudes and other environmental conditions which reinforce negative factors which in turn contribute to ways of feeling and behaving that inhibit true physical excellence. Rather than capitalizing upon the positive aspects of the developing motor skill, there is a continued focusing upon its imperfections or upon the length of time necessary to learn it. This type of training environment conditions the athlete to develop an exaggerated awareness of possible failure at the expense of wholesome concern with possible success. Guilt, rationalization, and resentment over parental demands for excellence best typify the athlete's response to the negative reinforcement. The burden of isolation, the fear of old traditions or idols, and the emotional weight of success are special forms of athletic stress that affect only those approaching greatness. These stresses will require that the individuals have adequate preparation in order that they not be immobilized by their effects.

Here is a brief description of the unique psychological and sociological features of each of the foregoing stress syndromes. Syndrome A is the effect of the ever increasing stress of social and emotional isolation. The prospective great must adjust to a subtle form of increased resentment by former friends

and associates. The response of these persons to the athlete as he moves away from his social group is conditioned by the unconscious fear that he will outgrow his need for their friendship. They begin to imagine or project the feeling that the athlete has outgrown his need for whatever contribution his friends have made to his life. Rather than remain anxiously in doubt about how the athlete feels, they unconsciously create situations which they can use as confirmation of their feelings that eventually they will be rejected. In the life of the professional athlete we are constantly reminded of this by the marital conflict that often accompanies sudden success. The wife is often one of the first to question her meaning and value in terms of the new life into which her mate is being catapulted. Often just when the athlete needs the most continuous form of emotional support, he finds that it is being withheld. Therefore, he feels isolated.

An intimate feature of this stress is the possessiveness of the fans who become identified with a particular athlete. They have a natural tendency to place him on a pedestal and then expect him to exhibit superhuman personality traits. This phenomenon only increases his sense of loneliness. Spectator expectations are always unrealistic, and yet many great athletes have unconsciously attempted to meet the fans' idealized standards, eventually to collapse under this unreasonable burden.

In the case of syndrome B, we find those athletes who develop uncon-

scious guilt feelings in response to the necessary "wholesome aggression" which is essential for athletic success. These men tend to be reliving old childhood fears associated with childish forms of aggression. In a very real sense they have developed an overscrupulous conscience with regard to hostile or aggressive feelings. These feelings are often so deeply repressed in their personalities that defeating an opponent often results in feelings of depression rather than elation. Somehow they must punish themselves for allowing natural aggressive tendencies to be expressed in an overt form. In their social training their teachers or parents have conditioned them to equate anger, hostility, aggression, and even dominance with being evil or bad. Almost every truly great athlete we have interviewed during the last four years, representing every major sport, has consistently emphasized that "in order to be a winner you must retain the killer instinct." Each of these men had to discover for himself that winning takes an aggressive, dominant spirit. Each found that he had to be emotionally free to become self-assertive and not be haunted by conscious or unconscious fears that such behavior may cause him to be socially rejected.

Syndrome C is a most subtle form of fear of success and has its roots deep in the early developmental history. The athlete who uses excessive rationalization is one who dares not place his ability on the line or even face the reality of his true potential. He is still bound by his parents' attitudes to define in specific ways the limits of his

tolerance for the stress of competition. Basically his social conditioning over-emphasized the pain of failure at the expense of the pleasure of success. Rewards or recognition for partial success or moderate improvement are absent from his life experience. The only social reward or positive parental recognition has been for winning or for showing excellence. Any performance short of these standards has been treated as failure. Often the parent communicates this attitude by his failure to respond to any performance which has not reached the parent's arbitrary standard of achievement. The end effect of such social conditioning is a personality structure with an inordinate fear of failure. The athlete unconsciously internalizes an unrealistic standard for human performance, and he studiously avoids the conscious experience of failure. He, therefore, learns to overdevelop his powers of rationalization and unconscious denial. He becomes expert at avoiding the ultimate truth by developing self-deceptive ways of justifying the quality of his performance. This is frequently expressed by falsely denying the meaning of success or victory. Somehow, in some way, the "moment of truth" is avoided in order not to have to face the reality of an absolute test of ability and then to be made to feel unworthy.

Syndrome D has a number of complex features, only a few of which can be discussed in a paper of this length. There are certain records and athletic standards that have become as awe-inspiring to competitors as religious symbols are to priests. There are individual

athletic greats who inspire a type of admiration that borders upon worship. These two facts have considerable significance in the lives of a number of young athletes who have used each as a source of motivation in their own teaching. These standards and greats come to represent the ultimate goal which the athlete internalizes as his ideal of what he will become. The youthful competitor retains these motivational standards over such a span of years that considerable anxiety tends to develop when his ability reaches a point where the former standard or idol can be challenged. In order to set new standards it is necessary to develop a healthy arrogance towards the old ones. Athletes like Bannister, who was the first to defy all distance traditions, cannot be inhibited by an unconscious respect for the former standard, a respect that is based upon fear. They must feel a genuine sense of having every right to the prize which they have made such a great personal sacrifice to obtain.

Syndrome E is a reaction to the responsibility of being first or being the champion. Very few individuals seem able to identify with the negative side of the ledger when we discuss the cost of high-level athletic success. To be in possession of the record places one in the position of being for the rest of one's athletic life a potential failure. Every audience, every fan, every representative of the press expects each old record to be exceeded at each new performance. Now excellence becomes the universal standard. Any performance

below a record is treated by most spectators with resentment. They often behave as if the athlete had somehow cheated them out of their just reward. This was best exemplified by the spectators during an Eastern swimming meet who actually booed the performance of a member of the swimming Hall of Fame. Their reaction was the fact that not only did he fail to set a new world record, but he had the audacity to place second. This is a real example of crowd behavior of which every great athlete we have interviewed is most acutely aware. It is not surprising to find that some men with the potential for greatness state that the immediate rewards of success are not sufficient great to sustain them in the face of the threat of crowd rejection.

SUMMARY

The authors review the five most frequent causes of success-phobia which they have observed in clinic practice during the past twelve years: fear of social and emotional isolation; guilt with respect to self-assertion and aggression; unconscious fear of expressing one's potential; fear of old idols or traditions; and disinclination for the burden of success. Each of the fears may operate independently or conjointly with one or more of the others. Each is the result of social conditioning. The unconscious fear of isolation, guilt over aggression, and the threat of old standards are psychological blocks which respond well to counseling. The exaggerated use of rationalization

much more resistant. This protective mechanism is too deeply ingrained and rationalization is too readily available as an escape from the threat of failure. Since men in this category never consciously accept failure, re-education becomes a special problem. They are never able to change those features of their personalities which they are either unable or unwilling to accept about themselves.

It is strongly recommended that those who demonstrate physical giftedness receive special psychological attention. This is of particular significance when athletic greatness is imminent. The athletes who have gained insight into the negative side of greatness

will be able to protect themselves against it.

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