

## THE CONNECTICUT INTERSCHOLASTIC ATHLETIC CONFERENCE



### The “Growth Mindset” in Athletics?

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Many educators have read Dr. Carol Dweck’s research on “The Growth Mindset.” Without a doubt, they understand that resilience is a characteristic that can be cultivated and learned but it requires self-awareness, the ability to handle criticism, and mental toughness. Are those latter skills incapable of being learned? Can they be acquired or strengthened? Dr. Dweck believes that they can. There are numerous coaches and athletes who feel the same way. Let’s take a look at how good coaching supports the “growth mindset” and how it creates resiliency. In this same look, we can see how a “fixed” mindset inhibits athletic excellence as well as academic performance.

Take a moment to reflect on Michael Jordan’s Nike ad. In that spot he cites the 26 times that he was assigned by a coach to take the game winning shot in a designed play and missed it. He mentions the number of shots that he missed and games that he played in that his team lost. He mentions that to be successful, one must take risks, experience setbacks, and be able to self-reflect and correct performance errors to achieve success. He speaks of failure in the season when he returned from his attempt to play Major League Baseball and the Bulls did not challenge for an NBA championship. He states that he was mentally and physically unprepared that season; and, he vowed to never let that happen again. After that season, Chicago won three straight NBA Championships.

Athletics, when coached properly, teach young men and women to not fear losing. In fact, failure often becomes the motivation for improvement. But that improvement can only happen with honest reflection, acceptance of feedback and a willingness to accept imperfection. Even the great Vince Lombardi stated, “Perfection is not attainable but if we chase it, we can catch excellence!” Dr. Dweck maintains that we must never give up hope, that we have to continue the pursuit of perfection despite failure. How do coaches in high school athletics teach that trait?

We often hear that losing is not the same as failing. In a growth mindset world, that is indeed true. The fixed mindset athlete, one who may believe that his/her ability is endowed, may see failure as the “end.” To that individual, the loss or the defeat cannot be overcome. It is an end; it is “failure.” While that is a dramatic view, it presents the “fixed mindset” athlete.

Good coaches continually stress the notion that athletes can improve, that they can get better. Some athletes, when benched or taken off the starting lineup, feel that they have failed. They feel that they are relegated to a state of “no improvement.” Nothing is further from the truth. Good coaches provide constructive criticism and always provide suggestions for improvement. A good athlete (good means an athlete with the “growth mindset”) will see any setback as temporary. That individual sees the need to

work on certain skills to improve. That “growth mindset” athlete feels that she/he can get that starting position back. The team that has been defeated in a contest should have the philosophy that if the opponent is again on the schedule, victory can be possible, with some changes in the manner of play!

The message here is that if we are not prepared for setbacks, we can never get better. We must view defeat as a challenge to improve and not as a failure to which we must resign ourselves.

Prevailing wisdom suggests that success is not necessarily determined by whether we win or lose, but how we handle either outcome. A win or a loss means continued improvement, a look to seek the improvement of imperfections. Coaches seek to instill in their athletes the need to constantly self-assess, to get better and, in doing so, the athlete gets prepared for the next level of competition. Isn't that philosophy one that should be applied to all areas of our lives?

Seeing a failure in the pursuit of a life goal without addressing it as a temporary setback stymies growth potential. Anyone who sees his or her continued success as a result of an innate ability or sees success being the result of “peak improvement” cannot make his/her performance better. That type of philosophy can be dangerous to an organization; it may encourage stagnation, fear, and indifference. A growth mindset or an individual who welcomes a challenge or uncertainty is one who will strengthen an organization. Failure may occur, but the risk to seek improvement is not placed in jeopardy. The encouraging possibility here is that a setback will not be seen as a failure; it will be seen as a challenge to overcome!

Education-based athletics teaches skills for life. Parents who may be upset about playing time, or feel a personal affront if their child doesn't have a starting position lose sight of an important fact. They fail to see that those types of athletic situations prepare young men and women for the rigors of society and the “working world.” Good coaches look to always provide feedback. They seek to get the best from their student-athletes and see athletics as an extension of the classroom. These coaches know that winning is not as important as teaching resiliency. These coaches have been supporters of the growth mindset and may have not even realized it. We need to teach the growth mindset as coaches and as educators. How great would it be if we all realized the benefits of that philosophy!