



A coach's guide to perfectionism

What is perfectionism?

Perfectionism is about the unrealistic expectations that people might have for themselves and for other people in their life. It can feature in lots of different areas of people's lives. Importantly for coaches, perfectionism can be particularly evident in sport.

There are several forms of perfectionism. Some people expect themselves to be perfect (self-oriented perfectionism), some people expect other people to be perfect (other-oriented perfectionism), and some people think that other people in their life, like a parent, coach, or teacher, expect them to be perfect (socially prescribed perfectionism).

Everyone has perfectionism to some degree. Some people have high levels of perfectionism. Other people have low levels of perfectionism. Most of us are somewhere in between.

What are the consequences of perfectionism?

If your athletes expect themselves to be perfect, it won't mean they work hard and perform better. It means lots of unnecessary anxiety and worry.

If they expect others to be perfect, it can impact negatively on their relationships (e.g., with teammates) and they will feel less supported when they need help.

If they believe that other people expect them to be perfect, they are likely to feel unhappy, stressed, and lonely. This is the worst kind of perfectionism.

How can coaches help?

If you think one of your athletes is having problems with their mental health (e.g., they are upset all the time), advise them to talk it through with their parents or see their GP. Young Minds and Student Minds are organisations that also provide information on a range of topics designed to help young people.

If this is not the case, and you simply want to help your athletes better manage their expectations and feel supported, here are some handy tips:

1. Encourage your athlete to focus on things other than the outcomes of their performances, such as how much effort they gave or if they improved.
2. Reward your athlete's efforts even when things go wrong. Mistakes are part of learning and should be accepted.
3. Try to avoid encouraging your athlete to compare themselves to others. Instead focus on personal goals and improvement.

Other helpful resources and references:

Antony, M. M. & Swinson, R. P. (2009). When perfect isn't good enough: Strategies for coping with perfectionism. Oakland: New Harbinger.

Dobosz, A. M. (2016). The perfectionism workbook for teens: Activities to help you reduce anxiety and get things done. New Harbinger; Workbook edition.

Greenspon, T. (2002). Freeing our families from perfectionism. Minneapolis, MA: Free Spirit Publishing.