Minimizing Regrets in Sport

By Jamie E. Robbins, Ph.D. and Christopher T. Stanley, Ph.D.

Should Have or Shouldn’t Have

Many individuals contemplate the “should haves” and “shouldn’t haves” of their decisions. In retrospect, they wonder if the outcome would have been better had a different decision been made. For example, a coach may ask: “What if I had taken a timeout earlier in the second half?” In such a scenario, if you believe the outcome would have been better, you likely have felt “regret.” In fact, you probably beat yourself up about the decision for hours, days and even longer depending on the influence of the event on your season.

Sport is laden with examples of athletes regretting decisions. In baseball, Jose Canseco claimed he regretted getting involved with steroids. Tiger Woods expressed regrets over his “transgressions” away from the golf course. In college soccer, Elizabeth Lambert voiced regrets over her aggressive actions on the field. Sport-related regret, however, is not reserved for media-driven cases. In fact, most amateur and recreational athletes also report instances of regret. Regardless of the level at which they are experienced, whether they are big or small, all those involved in sport are likely to experience regret.

Regret is one of the most pervasive emotions. In fact, in some instances, regret may be more intense than anger, anxiety, boredom, disappointment, fear, guilt, jealousy and sadness (Saffrey & Roese, 2006). Why does all this matter? It matters because regret can negatively influence well-being as it may be accompanied by dissatisfaction, doubt, depression and anxiety (Dijkstra & Bareld, 2008; Gilovich & Medvec, 1995). These negative emotions can have serious implications for sport performance.

If athletes feel regret, they may begin to doubt themselves or become more anxious. Additionally, regrets about off-field and on-field issues can distract, disrupt focus and lower confidence. Ultimately, doubt, anxiety, distractions, disrupted focus and low confidence hinder performance. The trick, therefore, is to minimize regrets. In the following article, the authors will discuss common regrets — identified in former and current athletes — and provide suggestions for minimizing and coping with current feelings of regret.

COMMON REGRETS

Sport is full of situations that can lead to regret because it’s full of decision-making. To illustrate, do any of the following questions sound familiar?

- Do I go to bed early tonight because we have a game tomorrow or should I hang out with my significant other?
- Should I pass to the wing or the midfielder?
- Should I voice my disagreement with a teammate?
- Should I go to the weight room this morning?

These decisions can be complex, depending on age, maturity and context. More specifically, priorities change with age and situation, therefore, some athletes may decide to forgo a good night sleep in exchange for a fun night out. As well, a more experienced athlete may choose the wrong pass. And finally, fear of confrontation or conflict on an already non-cohesive team could leave athletes wary of sharing their thoughts and opinions with one another. Numerous factors influence decisions, and often a less effective choice is made, followed by feelings of regret.

Regrets typically fall into two categories: 1) Regrets of action (shouldn’t haves); and 2) Regrets of inaction (should haves). Table 1 illustrates examples of each.

How can coaches prompt athletes to think about these issues in advance to avoid later regrets? And what can be done after the fact to help them “let go” of the regretful feelings?

AVOIDING REGRET

It may be difficult to eliminate all possible regrets; however, it is feasible to minimize regrets by providing vicarious learning experiences for athletes. A recent study conducted by the authors of this article demonstrated that regret can be minimized by simply providing a vicarious learning scenario. Collegiate teams were split into two groups: one group that received “regret stories” from former athletes, and another group that did not receive the stories. Through the course of the season, the athletes in the group receiving the stories reported significantly fewer regrets compared with their counterparts, thus demonstrating that interventions can aid athletes in avoiding some of the common pitfalls that lead to regrets.

Coaches could employ this technique directly. For example, a coach may have former athletes talk to current players about good, bad and questionable decisions they made and resulting regrets. In addition, a coach may provide written examples of athletes’ regrets to get players thinking about what they would or should do in a similar situation. This may even be part of an exit interview process that enables a coach to keep a running inventory of past athletes’ regrets. In either case, the key is to provide an open forum to discuss the issues together as opposed to lecturing athletes about good and bad decisions. Athletes, like most of us, do not want to be told what to do, but rather they want to be active participants in the decision-making. Table 2 shows regrets provided by former college-level athletes that could be used as examples to begin the discussion. This could be done several times throughout the season using regrets that are specific to situations you currently are encountering.

The examples help show athletes they are not alone in their feelings and thoughts. As well, it shows athletes how easy it is to get caught in their own minds and think they are making the right choices or doing the right things. It is easier to see mistakes later and thus feel regret because they can’t be fixed. This is a chance to provide a window into their future by looking at others like them. More specifically, I may define my lack of commitment as being more “well-rounded,” but after hearing another athlete’s regret about not committing, I may reinterpret my behaviors. Had I not heard the regrets of those who came before me, I may not have changed my behaviors. My realization of my lack of commitment may have come years later, leaving me with only regrets.

Therefore, a coach may prompt discussion

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**TABLE 1: Examples of Regrets**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Regrets of inaction</th>
<th>Regrets of action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not holding teammates accountable</td>
<td>Separating oneself from the team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not participating in clubs, organizations or community service</td>
<td>Being mean to teammates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not committing enough time to sport</td>
<td>Getting involved in teammates’ fights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not practicing skills more in off season</td>
<td>Partying too much</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not voicing opinions to coaches</td>
<td>Eating the wrong food</td>
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<tr>
<td>Not being confident enough</td>
<td>Comparing myself with others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not seeking help about body image issues</td>
<td>Making the wrong pass</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Taking the wrong shot</td>
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</tbody>
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about and identification of behavior changes in a timely manner, ultimately improving athletes’ chances of walking away from the season with fewer regrets.

**LETTING GO OF REGRETFUL FEELINGS**

No matter how much time is put into discussing what to do and what not to do, athletes still will make incorrect decisions. Therefore, as coaches, you must recognize your limits. All you can do is prepare them and then allow them to make their mistakes. Once they make their mistakes, it is critical you focus on “lessons learned” and “moving forward” rather than “what they did wrong” and “why they made the wrong decision.” Attempt to keep them focused on what they will do next time, not what they did last time.

This “restructuring” is not easy, as it is frustrating watching others make the same mistakes over and over. However, decision-making research shows that although there is a rational and logical method to making decisions (i.e. problem is identified, information is gathered, alternatives are evaluated and a choice is made), most of us still make decisions based on intuition and instincts (Chase & Simon, 1973; Klein et al., 1986). Thus when poor decisions are made, the next step has to be “letting it go.”

It is critical for athletes and coaches to leave mistakes and poor decisions in the past and keep the conversation and action moving forward. For example, if a player misses an open shot on goal because they kicked high instead of low, you would focus the conversation on kicking low the next time they have an open goal. They regret their choice, but can’t undo it. Discussing why that decision was made keeps the focus on the past and may invoke a fear of failure, whereas discussing best choices given future situations will shift focus forward on what can and will be done next time.

If, on the other hand, the decision is one that requires punishment or reproof, these should be executed quickly. However, once athletes pay their dues, you as a coach have to be willing to “let it go.” Perhaps you will have a player sit out the next game or practice. It is important to dispense an appropriate consequence, but then move on. The athlete will likely feel regret, which can be beneficial if it leads to lessons learned and consequent behavior changes. However, we don’t want thinking about “what could have been” to negatively influence confidence and make players more hesitant in the future. Therefore, regrets can be helpful if they encourage learning and behavior change, but ineffective if they keep athletes guessing about what could have been.

### TABLE 2: Examples of Regrets from Former Collegiate Athletes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Regret</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Team-related</td>
<td>I had a boyfriend from high school...I remember being in tears on the phone every night (wasting time and money and especially wasting time that I should have been spending with my new teammates getting to know them). I was so stuck feeling bad that I left instead of realizing that he should be supportive and help me through that hard time...I should have ended the relationship. I would have been able to perform better on the field and socially with my teammates.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Priority-related</td>
<td>My final year as a senior there were three of us who were captains. I’m not a person who voices her opinion a lot and I wish I had. We had issues with one of the captains taking her role a bit too seriously and yelling at a lot of the underclassmen on the team. I should have stepped up to the plate and said what I should have said to her, which was, “Stop being so mean to your teammates.” But, I didn’t until she ended up yelling at me at one point in the game. A few times freshmen came to me because they were frustrated with her yelling at them. I just wish I would have had the “balls” to stand up to her and for my teammates...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication-related</td>
<td>During my college experience we had some instances on the team in which girls were not willing to hold themselves or friends accountable on the field. I wish I would have been more of a leader and better teammate to push them to the next level.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence-related</td>
<td>I would have liked to have handled that situation by not comparing myself with other people and not worrying about how good I needed to be. I also would have liked to have played without feeling completely embarrassed every time I made a mistake. Because of these thoughts, I never wanted to touch the ball and unsurprisingly it took all the fun out of the sport I used to love.</td>
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</table>

**CONCLUSION**

Taken together, it is important to recognize that the goal is to provide tools for athletes to use when making decisions. The reality is that athletes still are going to respond in ways that encourage regret. In such situations, it is part of the coach’s job to help athletes identify the lesson learned and focus on the next step forward. Additionally, some athletes will be able to learn from the regrets of others. They should be given the chance to discuss the issues openly and honestly as a team to promote this type of learning. In fact, the conversations may be best without a coach’s presence, as athletes may be more likely to open up and provide dissenting opinions and ideas. The idea is that these conversations will encourage them to share thoughts and solve interpersonal problems in advance, while concurrently aiding in their personal decision-making throughout the season.

Discussing regrets should not be used as a scare tactic. You don’t want to be a public service announcer trying to stop smoking by showing black lungs. Rather, you want to start them thinking with the end in mind. Help them see that the decisions they make today will influence their emotions tomorrow. But most important, help them teach each other. The best-run teams are those where the athletes police each other. Through open discussion and group problem solving, your athletes will begin to make better decisions and enjoy the process.

**References**


**About the Authors**

Jamie Robbins earned her MS and Ph.D. in sport psychology from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill and Michigan State respectively. She has worked as a sport psychology consultant for teams and athletes across the country. The author of It’s a Mental Thing: Five keys to improving performance and enjoying sport, she currently is an assistant professor at Winston-Salem State University.

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