When Things Don’t Go Well

I thought maybe this month I’d talk about another mental game aspect. It’s easy to have confidence and bowl well when everything goes according to plan. What happens when things don’t go well? How do you keep moving toward your goals and continue to make progress?

So, you’re working on your game, you test your progress in leagues or tournaments, and you have not made the progress that you were hoping for, or simply have fallen a little short of your goals. So now what do you do?

In order to progress in any activity, you need to have the right attitude about what has happened, and keep this in perspective. You need to understand that athletic progress comes with a series of ups and downs. You can use the downs as learning experiences. These less than successful experiences all happen for a reason. If you didn’t have anything to learn from these experiences why didn’t you win the event? While I admit that there are times when despite your best efforts the success did not come, more often there is something you can take forward from each event. This is probably even true when you win an event, but it is more often true when you have setbacks.

If your attitude in these situations is negative, if you feel that you just can’t do this or that you screwed up and there is no hope, this attitude becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Feelings of defeatism simply don’t get you any closer to your goal. We all “fail” (that is, fail to win the event) much more often than we “win”. So how do we use these experiences to have future success?

You must analyze what happened. Remembering that there are three phases to your bowling; did the lapse come from the physical, mental, or tactical phase? Was it one of these, or a combination of more than one element of your game? You can’t fix it if you don’t stop to realize what happened. Hindsight will help you understand where you fell short only if you are honest with yourself.

Once you analyze what happened, you can then begin to learn from it. Learning means that you put together the list, preferably in writing, of those things that you can improve on based on your performance. Finally, once you have a list of what you feel you need to learn, you can put together a plan for improvement that will make you a better player.

Finally, you will need to correct the mistakes in order to improve. This means that your plan for improvement must be implemented. It’s clearly not enough to understand how to improve without implementing your plan to make changes. Now that we have a formula for improving ourselves as players, let’s look at an example of change that creates improvement.

Joe recently bowled well in a tournament, up until the last two games. Then the wheels seemed to come off the wagon. Joe went from comfortably making the cut to missing the cut entirely. Joe is disappointed, but feeling good about physical execution during this tournament. In order to put a plan together, Joe must look in the mirror and analyze his performance with the aid of 20-20 hindsight.

First, did this lapse in the final two games come from a lack of execution? Well, yes and no. Joe made good shots down the stretch, but started to do a bit of scoreboard watching during the last two games. So, practicing a one-shot-at-a-time focus, particularly at “crunch time” must be something that goes on the list. Joe also felt a bit of an adrenaline rush during the last game that caused a couple of shots to be slower than normal, causing a couple of shots to go high. One of these shots caused Joe to leave an un-makeable split, costing Joe 11 pins. Since Joe missed the cut by 5 pins, this alone made the difference between success and failure.

Mentally, Joe also had visions of winning the tournament in the days leading to and during the qualifying round. You really can’t win the tournament during qualifying, particularly if you don’t make the cut! Most tournaments are really a series of mini-tournaments. First, make the cut, then make the finals, then win the
tournament. So, the next task on Joe’s list is to practice breaking the tournament up into small, execution-based goals that will not detract from his performance.

Tactically, a ball change and a zone change in lane play would have made the last two games more successful. But which ball change would have worked? Upon reflection, Joe finally understood which ball and line change would likely have been most successful.

So, we put together the list of “what we learned” which is: 1) maintain a focus on one shot at a time, which does not include scoreboard watching or dreams of winning the tournament, 2) maintain better speed control under stress and 3) learn to read the lanes better during transition times for the “right” ball change.

Putting this plan to practice time on the lanes means that Joe’s practice plane is to: 1) do mental practice drills of keeping his sole attention on the shot at hand, using league as a proving ground between tournaments, 2) practicing speed control by increasing/decreasing the speed of shots at about 3-4 shot increments (see last month’s article) and 3) practice making ball changes as a separate drill in about 4 shot increments to get better at seeing the difference in “shapes” down the lane made by each ball in your bag.

So, the next time you struggle in an event, learn from it! Just remember this 4-step formula for improvement: Attitude - Analyze – Learn – Correct and you will be well on your way to improvements that will lead to future success!

As always, if you’d like to see a specific topic discussed, e-mail me at proshop@denverbowlng.com.

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