

When the Cheering Stops

Dealing With Disappointment in Sport

An address given by Pastor John Roebig, BA, Mlitt, PhD(Cand), to the SLM Annual Conference, Gold Coast, August 2001.

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I don't know that I am the right person to be delivering this session. In my short time as a chaplain I haven't had to deal with much disappointment. My team has been mostly successful in competition, and when they did lose there was little disappointment.

As a psychologist I could get technical about Attributional Theory, Expectant Theory or Learned Helplessness. Or I could get Freudian and discuss Inner Psychic Conflict, Oedipal Complexes or fixations during the psycho-sexual development of the child. But my experience in the last few weeks has induced me to put aside my Powerpoint presentation and suggest to you a more simplistic explanation of disappointment in sport.

Let me give you some examples:

- A baseball team has just lost a series 3-0. The players drag their feet, gear and anything else they have to carry as they make their way to the lockerroom. Two players break away from the group and go to the fans to sign autographs. The team owner complains about the others not doing the same. I remark that their spirits are very low after such a loss. His reply is "But that's not the fans' fault."
- It is the second game of a best of three final. The team is already behind 0-1. One player, an international, plays probably the worst game he has ever played. His mistakes cost runs. His team loses the play-off 0-2. He is devastated and never gets back to the form he showed to become an international.
- A player works hard for selection in a national team. He is considered the best athlete on the park. When selections are made he misses out. He is confused as to how the best athlete is not chosen. He is ready to give up the sport.

What makes the difference between the two players in the first example and the rest? I believe the answer is as simple as the importance the individual places on success or failure. Is sport everything, or is it "just a game"?

Now before you want to attack me and tell me that to elite athletes sport is never just a game, I have it on good authority from world champions that when sport becomes their God they lose their enjoyment. Winning becomes everything. And this appears to be the key - the individual's perspective on their success or failure. This does not mean that they treat their sport lightly, that they do not strive to win or succeed in their aspirations. No, not at all. It is about priorities in life and putting sport, be it amateur or professional, into perspective.

Baseballer David Nilsson was speaking to a group of young players at a chapel service. I asked him what did being a Christian mean to him considering that he had become successful before becoming a Christian. He said it changed his attitude to the game. He still played hard. He still played to win. But he said there will come a time in life when you can no longer throw, hit, run, or kick or jump, depending on your sport, and then you find out that it was always just a game.

While counselling with a young player who missed national selection I used concepts from 2 Biblical texts. In Ecclesiastes 3 we have what I often refer to as the Biblical yin and yang, the balance of nature. Verse 4 says there is "a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance". Life is ups and downs. Contrary to popular belief, we will not win all the time. As David Nilsson put it about baseball, it is a game of winning and losing.

One of the greatest lies perpetrated upon our postmodern society is that we can, and should be, winners at everything we do. If we are failing there is something wrong with us. And so we have people who seek out psychologists, priests, and spirit mediums to find out what is wrong and how they can correct it. Yet here we have it Biblically, life is ups and downs.

There is another text in Philippians that encourages growth through perseverance. Philippians 3:13 - "Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize". While in context Paul is talking about the prize of eternal life in heaven, I believe the concept can be transferred to almost any area of life. Forgetting about our failures and shortcomings, we can keep the goal in front of us and strive to reach it.

From these 2 texts we can make a simple model for dealing with disappointment. Firstly, *Normalise* the experience (Ecc 3:4). Help the individual understand that disappointment is not the end of life but simply a season through which he must travel. Secondly, *Encourage* the athlete to put the past behind and keep focused on the goal (Phil 3:13).

Let me give you one word of warning here. (Or perhaps a few words). When you are working with the disappointed athlete don't be a psychologist, even if you are one. This is not a time for diagnosis and evaluation. Don't be a preacher. Again, this is not the time to preach your finest sermon. **DO BE A LISTENER.**

Being a listener can be very difficult. Sometimes it may mean remaining silent. Not many of us are comfortable with silence. Particularly as counsellors we think we should be saying something to make the person feel better. I recall a situation where I sat beside a fellow for about 30 minutes. All I said was "Doing it hard?" to which he nodded, and then "You know where I am if you want me" when I left his side after the 30 minutes. The next day he said to me "You will never know what it meant to me that you just sat beside me last night."

If you are going to speak, be genuine - show a genuine interest in the person. If you don't have genuine interest in the person you may need to rethink your position as a chaplain.

Learn to empathise. Purchase the book "People Skills" by Robert Bolton, and focus on part 1 where he describes active listening. Or if you want something more in depth get "The Skilled Helper" by Gerard Eagan.

Beware of using cliches and platitudes like, "It's not the end of the world"; "You've done well just to get here"; or Christian cliches like, "God allows these things to happen for a purpose"; "God obviously wants to teach you something"; or "..all things work together for good..". These have no meaning for people suffering disappointment from missing a major life goal. If the individual is a Christian then at a later time you can encourage from the Scriptures. Even if the individual is not a Believer, you can still encourage from Biblical precepts. But at a later time when the athlete has come to terms with his position.

We should also be aware that disappointment in an athlete's life may not necessarily relate to the sport. There are many disappointments in life relating to relationships, finances, business expectations etc. that are likely to have a bearing on the athlete's performance. Sometimes we need to be astute enough to deal with the real issue. On one occasion I was asked by a coach to approach a player and "get into his head". This player was an integral part of the team but had performed poorly for a period of time, actually being responsible for losing an important game. The coach knew this guy would be needed in the playoffs. When I visited with him he spoke of serious financial problems that occupied his mind. Getting him to talk through the issues allowed him to formulate a plan to deal with them. He was the single person who stemmed the attack of the opposition during the finals to allow his team to eventually win. His financial problems still existed, but he was able to put them aside and get on with the game.

So in summary, I would say that dealing with disappointment in sport requires you to be a listener, to empathise; to normalise the experience for the athlete; to be astute enough to identify if the problem is related to the sport or other personal issues; and when appropriate, to encourage perseverance.

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