



***“For the strength of the Pack is the Wolf, and the strength of the Wolf is the Pack.”***

### **The Mindset of a Champion**

By Carol Dweck (*Lewis & Virginia Eaton Professor of Psychology*)

There are things that distinguish great athletes – champions – from others. Most of the sports world thinks it’s their talent, but actually it is their *mindset*. Our individual outlook on life, formed through experience and environment creates the lens with which we view our world.

#### **Mindsets**

In my work, I have identified two mindsets about ability that people may hold (*Dweck, 1999; Dweck, 2006; Dweck and Leggett, 1988*). Some hold a **fixed mindset**, in which they see abilities as fixed traits. In this view, talents are gifts and you either have them or you don’t. Other people, in contrast, hold a **growth mindset**. They believe people can cultivate their abilities.

In other words, they view talents as potentialities that can be developed through practice.

It’s not that people holding this mindset deny differences among people. They don’t deny that some people may be better or faster than others acquiring certain skills, but they focus on the idea that everyone can get better over time.

These mindsets and their lessons are highly applicable of the world of sports. Are mindsets fixed or can they be changed? Mindsets are fairly stable beliefs, but they are beliefs, and beliefs can be changed.

#### **Mindsets and goals**

We have found in our research that people’s mindsets create completely different motivations. *The fixed mindset, in which you have only a certain amount of talent or ability, leads people to want to look good at all times. You need to prove that you are talented and not do anything to contradict that impression. In contrast, the growth mindset, in which you can develop your ability, leads people to want to do just that. It leads them to put a premium on learning.*

It is clear that both things – wanting to do well and wanting to learn to and improve – are important in a sports setting. It is important to validate your abilities through high quality performance in a competitive setting, and it’s also important to grow your skills over time.

#### **Mindsets and effort**

People in the fixed mindset feel negative about setbacks and mistakes. They believe that if you have a true ability, you shouldn’t need a lot of effort. Yet, there is no important endeavor in life certainly not in the sports world that can be accomplished and maintained without intense and sustained effort. This is serious because many young athletes who have a great deal of early ability can coast along for some time, outshining peers. At some point, however, natural ability may not be enough, and others may begin to pass them by.

In contrast, people in the growth mindset understand that effort is the way that ability is brought to life and allowed to reach fruition. Far from indicating a lack of talent, they believe that even geniuses need great effort to fulfill their promise. People with a growth mindset not only believe in the power of effort, they hold effort as a value. Ian Thorpe, the illustrious Australian swimmer, feels that as long as he's tried his best, he's been victorious. "For myself, losing is not coming second. It's getting out of the water and knowing you could have done better. For myself, I have won every race I've ever been in."

### **Where do mindsets come from?**

More and more we are finding that *mindsets are fostered by the kind of feedback* students get from the people who evaluate them: their parents, their teachers, and presumably their coaches. Specifically, the mindsets are fostered by a focus on the person (e.g., talent or ability) as opposed to a focus on the process (e.g., effort, learning)

### **Can mindsets be changed?**

Can a growth mindset be taught and will people reap benefits from learning it? The brain is a dynamic, malleable organ and that every time something new is learned will form new connections. Overtime, these connections make individuals smarter, quicker, faster, better. Students who learned the growth mindset of intelligence showed significant gains in numerous studies over students who have been shown to be in the fixed mindset.

### **Conclusion**

Without denying the importance of that thing called "talent", however, I believe that something else – an athletes' mindset can be equally important. I have described one mindset, built around a belief in fixed traits that can limit athletes' ability to fulfill their potential. It can do this by making them value looking good, being "the star," and staying in their comfort zone over stretching themselves to learn new things.

I have described another mindset, built around the belief in the expandable skills, that can foster athletes ability to fulfill their potential by making them prize learning, by making confidence (in improvement) easier to maintain, and by fostering effective strategies and sustained effort in the face of difficulty. Athletes who believe that athletic success is due to practice and hard work and not due to natural ability often have more success. Athletes who think their coaches believe in practice and hard work more than natural ability have more success.

We are finding that people absorb the mindset that is prevalent in their program. This means that coaches themselves must adopt a growth mindset and send messages to their athletes that they believe in improvement and that they value the practices that lead to it.

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