



BETTER ATHLETES
BETTER PEOPLE

Making The Concept Of Perfection Useful, Not Harmful

An excerpt from "Let Them Play" by Jerry Lynch

"Perfection belongs to the gods; the most we can hope for is excellence."

— Carl Jung

In my work, one thing I notice is how many parents want their kids to be perfect, and in turn, their children often strive to fulfill those wishes. When this happens, parents become perennially disappointed, and kids are never satisfied with their own performance.

Over the last forty years, I have worked with many thousands of young athletes between the ages of fifteen and twenty-two, from high school to college, and I can honestly say that half of these kids have suffered from what I call *perfection attention*, the act of constantly being obsessed with being perfect. Having such a lofty, unattainable goal positions them perfectly for failure. Yet frustratingly, they keep measuring their self-worth as athletes and people by outcomes and results, by winning and losing, by achievements and failures. Parents play a huge role in this malady because they believe, usually unconsciously or unintentionally, that they are better parents if their kids are perfect. Intellectually, a parent may know that perfection is not possible, yet they feel there is no harm in trying. As a result, I often find myself working with kids who are terribly disappointed in themselves, awfully frustrated, and often angry about not measuring up.

I remember one parent who unintentionally held back his love if his kid's performance was lackluster. The athlete, wanting to be loved, felt the pressure to win, achieve, and be perfect. What I believe the father desired for his child was to experience the joy, fun, and excitement of being the best that we can be at whatever we attempt. But this message became convoluted and obscured as his love for his kid became conditional.

No one can achieve perfection, which is godlike, but the concept can still be useful as a beacon, as a goal or inspiration, that can keep us on track as we pursue excellence. This is an appropriate use of the standard of perfection. The concept names our intentions but not what we expect to achieve, nor is it how we measure our self-worth. This is what I call being *perfectly imperfect*.

I like to remind children that there are only two kinds of athletes: those who fail and those who will fail. By this I mean that we are all imperfect. Even the greatest of the great are imperfect. Professional baseball hitters are considered great if they get a hit a third of the time. Professional basketball players are considered excellent if they make half of their shots from three-point range. If soccer players, on average, make one goal for every five shots they attempt, they are celebrated. All athletes fail, make mistakes, commit errors, and lose. Those who are the best always mean to do their best, they strive to be the best they can be, and this puts them in a position for good things to happen...but not *perfect* things.

When youngsters believe that their efforts have to be perfect, they are set up for failure. As parents, we can help our children handle failure by being vulnerable ourselves and shattering any illusions our children have

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Making The Concept Of Perfection Useful, Not Harmful, continued

that we are perfect. We can share our imperfections and our imperfect journey in life with them. Of course, we always seek excellence, but no one always achieves it. I often remind my kids: "Hey, I'm not perfect. It's my intention to be good, but perfect is not me."

The notion and illusion that one can be perfect creates tension, stress, anxiety, and frustration. As a parent, notice the ways that you emphasize external achievement, care about others' opinions, fear failure, engage in criticism, dwell on negative outcomes, and disengage with an activity when you feel incapable. When you act this way, your kids get the unspoken message that they too must be perfect.

Affirm the following to your kids and yourself: "Performance can never be perfect, since perfection is an illusion, an unattainable waste of time and energy. Instead, I will strive for excellence by simply doing and being my best." This is being *perfectly imperfect*.

Sports psychologist Dr. Jerry Lynch is the author of Let Them Play and the founder/director of Way of Champions, a consulting group geared toward "mastering the inner game" for peak sports performance. The parent of four athletic kids, he has over thirty-five years of experience as a sports psychologist, coach, athlete, and teacher. Drawing on his experience working with Olympic, NBA, and NCAA champions, Dr. Lynch transforms the lives of parents, coaches, and youth athletes. Find him online at wayofchampions.com.

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