

WHY WE PLAY

Daring Greatly by Embracing Failure



By Jody Redman, Associate Director, MSHSL

*"It is not the critic who counts: not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles or where the doer of deeds could have done better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly, who errs and comes up short again and again, because there is no effort without error or shortcoming, but who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions, who spends himself for a worthy cause; who, at the best, knows, in the end, the triumph of high achievement, and who, at the worst, if he fails, at least he fails while **daring greatly**, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who knew neither victory nor defeat."* — Theodore Roosevelt

It takes courage for students to show up every day in this public arena called high school athletics. It takes courage to be the students who wait for their turn to get into the game, to take the last shot, or to be put into the game to throw one pitch with the bases loaded. It takes courage to show up and try a new skill knowing mistakes will surely occur, to enter into a public arena where failure is inevitable, and to move outside of one's comfort zone.

Roosevelt captures the essence of showing up in the second line of the above quote: *"The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly."* We want students to enter into the arena and strive valiantly. We want them to fully engage in the opportunities that are being provided to them. There is so much to be gained but this can only happen if we provide them with a safe place where they can show up and try.

Trying is natural. Trying is attempting something new; it is the struggle to overcome difficulties; it is striving for something more. A willingness to try is what puts our athletes into the arena. But as Roosevelt says, with trying comes failure: *"there is no effort without error or shortcoming."* Think about how much time it requires to master a skill. The skill development of our students occurs when they try and fail, and then try and fail again, sometimes hundreds of times. Students who show up are going to fail. Sometimes this failure is met by a critic whose judgment is discouraging. We need to celebrate not discourage this process of trying and failing.

When did students learn that mistakes and failure are negative and should be avoided, that somehow they should achieve without failure? Consider a one-year-old who is learning to walk. When she falls down, she doesn't beat herself up, she doesn't get yelled at, and she isn't ridiculed. She falls down and then she gets back up. She tries again, falls down again and eventually learns to walk. Did her ultimate success occur because the adults watching her effort judged her, screamed at her or gave her a sarcastic eye roll filled with disapproval? Just the opposite is true. They cheered her on and encouraged her to try and try again.

As coaches we have limitless opportunities to provide messages to the young people on our teams. Much of our athlete's willingness to risk trying something new is determined by how we respond to their efforts: the point guard's risk to drive the lane with the left hand instead of the dominant right, the gymnast's risk to throw a double fly-away instead of the lay-out fly-away, or the goaltender who takes the risk to leave the comfort of the blue-painted crease to challenge the oncoming shooter. All of these risks take the athlete out of his or her comfort zone to the land of uncertainty, where there is a good chance that failure will occur. Our response to their efforts, to their risks and their failures and to their willingness to leave their comfort zone will either encourage students to try something new or convince them to stay locked in a risk free comfort zone.

The late motivational speaker Zig Ziglar said, *"Failure is an event, not a person."* Yet at times our response to students when they make a mistake is communicated with arms outstretched in disbelief, a scrunched up angry expression, and screams that center on our disappointment, disapproval and disgust. Our response makes it very clear that the failure is the person. In the book **Top 20 Teachers**, the authors' state, *"It is because of the frequency and likelihood of these responses that people fear failure and mistake making. As a result, they fear moving outside their Comfort Zone and handicap their learning and potential."*

We have a choice to be the *coach* or the *critic*. We either find value in failure and mistakes and our students grow—we *coach*. Or we respond with negativity and the students on our team remain locked in their comfort zone, where they won't take risks, they play it safe, and learn nothing—we *criticize*.

Our awareness of how we respond to a student who makes the choice to show up is essential to keeping him in the arena *"so that his place,"* says Roosevelt, *"shall never be with those cold and timid souls who knew neither victory nor defeat."*

Performing in public takes courage. Traveling down a road not yet travelled takes courage. It takes courage to try a new skill and to risk not knowing or understanding

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something. It takes courage to show up every day. We ultimately determine if our students will take the leap of faith to trust and risk failure simply by how we respond.

Take some time and reflect on how you respond to your players when they fail and make a mistake. Based on your response to their “error or shortcoming,” is it acceptable for your athletes to take risks and stretch themselves or, based on your typical response, is it far better if they stay safely tucked inside their comfort zone?

Daring greatly means risking failure by stepping into the arena, getting into the game when others choose to sit it

out, and choosing to move outside one’s comfort zone to try something new. When you create an environment where students feel comfortable and embrace mistakes and failure, the athletes on your team will follow Roosevelt’s lead, will dare greatly and will show up.

*This article was written by Jody Redman, MSHSL Associate Director, and is the third article in a four part series appearing in **The Prep Coach** this year. The fourth and final article will focus on **WHY WE PLAY**.*