

When things aren't going perfectly

Winning and losing is all in your head

How do top athletes handle defeat? What impact does the external pressure of expectations have on these athletes? And what role does the subconscious play in that? Airs is interviewing Thomas Baschab, mental trainer and co-founder of mental coaching, mental coach of various Olympic champions, mentor of top athletes in soccer and tennis. In particular, Thomas Baschab helps athletes recover their potential during crisis situations.

As Confucius once said, "If you make a mistake and don't correct it, you're bound to make a second one". How does this apply to high performance sports?

BANSCHAB: First of all, mistakes are everywhere. Everyone makes mistakes. In high performance sports, you also have external pressure from the media, coaches as well as the sponsors. A top athlete is always a public person. Mistakes and defeats are mercilessly addressed by the media. Let's take a look at soccer, for example. After Manuel Neuer's absence due to injury, Sven Ulreich was the goalie in the Champions League semi-final in Madrid and happened to make a momentous mistake, which ended with the elimination of FC Bayern. The media was judging him ruthlessly. The fact that Sven Ulreich has had an outstanding season leading up to the tournament did no longer interest anyone at that time. All the good results were obscured by a single mistake.

That's where you come in. What do you do to restore the stability of the athletes? What do you advise your protégés to do?

BANSCHAB: It is interesting to note that in Chinese the characters for crisis and change are almost identical. You emerge stronger from every crisis you have overcome. Reinhold Messner has climbed all 14 eight-thousanders. But it took him 27 attempts to do that. Falling down is allowed, but staying down is not. But only if you recognize your mistakes, face them and don't try to blame someone else. Sven Ulreich reacted immediately. He accepted his mistake and took responsibility for it. He didn't burden anyone else with it, which would not have been team-oriented and he didn't try to pass the blame on to third parties. When it became clear a little later that it was not only his fault, public opinion suddenly shifted again. It is therefore crucial to admit the mistake to yourself and then forgive yourself for it. Generally, the outside world also forgives you and pressure is relieved. It's okay to withdraw for 2-3 days. I call it "professional moaning". You can think of it like a steam boiler. If the pressure is too high, the valve opens and steam is released. It should not take too long however, because the valve must close again, just like a steam boiler. No steam - no energy!

You've been working with top athletes for over 20 years. You are well known for your simple methods and techniques.

BANSCHAB: That's right. My approach is: If it's not easy, then it just won't work. Which means that all my techniques and tools for my protégés must also be easy to implement. Let's stick to error management.

1. I always ask the athlete the following question: Why? Why are you doing the sport? Why do you torture yourself? The answer often is: Because I want to win, because I want recognition and so on. No: Only if it is done out of love and passion for the sport or out of gratitude for what the sport has given me, is the right energy for success released. Love and gratitude are the foundation for the question of why. Let's imagine a beautiful old tower. The tower symbolically stands for the why, the goals. The foundation in this example stands for the love for the cause, the love for reaching the goal. If the foundation is not strong enough, the tower will not be able to stand. Nietzsche expressed it quite well: "He who has a why to live can bear almost any how."

2. Kinesiology and Emotional Freedom Technic (EFT) have proven to be very effective in practice as supporting treatment methods. These techniques make it possible to dissolve mental blockages in the subconscious. If your subconscious doesn't want to, your consciousness won't go along with it either. So, my task is to work within the subconscious of these athletes and to provide them with the tools and techniques to continue working independently.

For example, target practice. Let's imagine a downhill racer. He's at the start, waiting for the start signal. This may take some time, because the last runner has just started driving. Best-case scenario, he is calm and focused, but the time spent waiting could take away his concentration. Most likely he'll be nervous. There is a quite simple but effective exercise to increase your focus again. Imagine a target. Like you know it from archery.

Now imagine a mark outside of the target that is moving. Now concentrate on the mark and try to place it in the middle of the target. This exercise doesn't even take a whole minute and is very effective, so we ask the downhill racer to do it in the starting box. He will be much calmer and more focused during his run.

Give it a shot. The more often you do this exercise, the faster you will achieve the desired effect - Perfect for a top athlete.

You say you're intensively or almost exclusively working within the subconscious. I think that for some athletes who are geared towards performance, this is a bit unusual.

BANSCHAB: That may be, but give the following exercise a try: Stand up. Separate your legs at shoulder width. Then take your right arm and extend it straight forward. Now turn the arm to the right and back as far as it will go. Pay attention to the spot where the arm is deadlocked. Now pull the arm back, close your eyes and imagine how you can continue turning your arm. Farther than the spot you remembered, so to speak. Good! Now return to the original starting position and repeat the exercise. Turn your arm forward again and to the right and back again. You will notice that you are making good progress. That is

experienced subconsciousness. You have told your subconscious mind that you can turn your arm further.

This is usually the point where even the most critical athletes realize that there is something to it.

Actually, it's working perfectly. It's amazing how the subconscious mind works.

BANSCHAB: I don't think it's all that important to explain how the subconscious mind works. What matters is the result. Placebos are used in medicine as well. Drugs with no effect, which still work and make symptoms disappear.

I read that you helped Simon Schempp to the world championship title during the Biathlon World Championship 2017 with a text message. What went on there?

BANSCHAB: Oh, Simon Schempp, a gifted biathlete. He had already been on the podium eight times as part of the team at World Cup races and Olympic Games. But it just wasn't working out for him solo. The pressure was tremendous, because in all the interviews he was asked why he had not yet won a medal by himself. On the last day, the mass start was on the agenda, the last chance for Simon to win a medal at this event. The day before I wrote him a text message with the "Why" question. The following day, he became world champion. In retrospect, he told me, the text message had put a smile on his face and relieved him of the enormous pressure. In 2018 Simon Schempp won a silver medal at the Olympic Games in Pyeongchang.

Of course, there are many reasons for a success like this, this mental training was only a piece of the puzzle in the work in the overall package of the biathlete.

Let's get back to Sven Ulreich. If I was him I'd be afraid that another faux pas would happen to me during the next game. And maybe even worse, the fear of the fear that I might fail again.

BANSCHAB. Fundamentally, fear isn't a bad thing. It makes us react to dangerous situations. But in this case, there is no life-threatening dangerous situation. Fear of mistakes is a barrier that undermines performance and drains energy. The goal here is to transform this negative energy from fear into strength, passion and joy.

Every mistake will forever remain a part of the athlete's history. The question is, how will he deal with it? If he manages to use his potential and overcome this fear, a renewed self-confidence is automatically achieved. Let's imagine a skydiver. The immediate jump out of the airplane will always remain a conquest. If he then lands on earth alive and well, this will give him a boost towards increased self-confidence. In the figurative sense, my work is to accompany the 2 seconds of the jump each time. Stepping out of the open airplane door.

But the following applies here as well: Recognizing fear and standing by it. Denial or repression only exacerbates this fear and can even lead to physical symptoms. If we stick with the skydiver. If he doesn't jump and returns to the airport inside the plane, the barrier for jumping only increases until he won't even get on the plane anymore.

It is also helpful to change your perspective in a situation of fear. Here we can also use the example of the skydiver. If he thinks about the possible risks before the jump, the parachute may not open, a gust of wind sends him into the middle of nowhere, however, it makes the jump difficult. If his thoughts are focused on a wonderful flight, infinite freedom, the great view of the earth, then the jump will be easier. Nevertheless, both situations are centered around the same thing, only the perspective has changed.

I always notice top athletes performing quite idiosyncratic rituals. For Rafael Nadal, his water bottles must be lined up according to an exact pattern during the game, Serena Williams only enters the court when her shoelaces are tied according to a certain ritual, the list goes on. Do ritual patterns of movement work?

BANSCHAB: Most athletes are superstitious. As long as the superstition is separated from the ritual, everything is fine. If the ritual is used to prepare for a competition, there is nothing wrong with it, because it provides the athlete with a certain sense of stability. It becomes problematic, however, when the ritual is held responsible for victory or defeat. Then a boundary is crossed by transferring the responsibility for success to the ritual. Thus, a falling water bottle, the wrong socks or a wrong towel can quickly be considered the reason for a defeat.

One last question before we wrap it up: Is there a difference between team sports and individual sports with regard to dealing with mistakes?

BANSCHAB: According to my experience, team athletes are empowered by sharing the responsibility for the entire team. However, if this fails, the psychological strain usually increases. The individual athlete, on the other hand, only has to deal with himself.

Thomas Baschab: Mental trainer and instructor