

The following article might be of interest to players and coaches. It looks at, "Attribution Theory," in sport and how players seek to find the reasons why the result turned out how it did.

## **Why Do We Win Or Lose?**

*When, as the very end of it all reaches its final conclusion and calm descends,*

*The furor and intensity of the contest is finally over, we shake hands and the totals reckoned up.*

*The great scorer himself will come to mark against your name.*

*He'll record not how you won or lost but how you played the game.*

And for all sports players, you'd hope to be able look back with satisfaction, in the knowledge that you always competed strongly but fairly, to the best of your ability, with due respect for the opponent and in the spirit of sport, regardless of the outcome.

However, what might be of more concern for the active player (and coach) is not whether you won or lost or how you played the game, but rather where to place the blame.

For many who've spent time involved in sport, particularly competitive team sport, you'll remember those annoying players who are quick to take personal credit for success but will look to place the blame elsewhere when things go wrong. For those players, the blame for failure may regularly be attributed to a variety of factors: poor officiating, unfavourable weather, unplayable surface, poor team mates, the unlucky and unexpected bounce of the ball etc; anything but the player himself! There are many such dishonest (and insecure) players, but honesty and realism in attributing success or failure must be the best way to secure a settled mind, maintain long-term involvement and gain optimum success.

Just like others in life, the sports player has a natural urge to examine things that go on all around and attempt to identify the reasons why they happened the way they did. In other words, we try to make good sense of it all in order to find some peace of mind. It's an uncomfortable situation, often leading to a chaotic mind, when it seems impossible to make any sense of why things are happening all around in the way they sometimes do.

What really were the causative factors in the result of that match?

It's often not an easy question to answer, and much might depend on the subjective viewpoint and personal opinion of the person(s) involved. However, for those most directly concerned ie player and coach, it really is vital to examine the reasons for success or failure in an honest and objective manner, so that future performance, achievements and results can be controlled and guided in the optimum way. A plan can be put in place.

The causes or factors which a player identifies as those most influential on performance and/or result will usually determine the way that future tasks are approached.

Examples:

It's been a long, hot, dry day for a tournament. The player has reached the final, when the weather suddenly and unexpectedly changes. A sudden, heavy shower causes the playing surface to change radically; it becomes slower and stickier.

Winning player: "I won because I was obviously the better player and have the ability to adapt my game and to play well on any surface."

Losing player: "I lost because of the bad luck with the weather. It ruined my game, and anyway my coach never arranged training for me in such conditions. It wasn't my fault at all!"

Future outcomes: Winning player goes forward with confidence and plays well on a variety of surfaces regardless of weather. Or that same player disregards the lucky weather element on that occasion and now has a falsely elevated view of own ability, leading to possible problems associated with overconfidence in future.

Loser lacks confidence to play on wet surfaces and doesn't enter events when forecast is for rain. Or loser doesn't address the real issue that improvement to skills is what's really needed.

### Maintaining Self-Worth

No surprise, but sometimes, a player may not be really honest with himself or others when saying why the outcome happened. The reasons given might be to preserve ego, pride and a worthy self and public-image.....possibly a false front is set up.

It's also of note how in the above example, the player gaining the win and success puts it down to personal ability (a stable and long-term consistent factor), thereby boosting a positive self-image.

The loser protects self-image by attributing failure to an external factor (bad luck) which there's no control over. Plus the fault attributed to the coach. Thus, an attempt is being made to maintain a positive self-image, in the short term anyway.

This theory is known as, "**Self-Serving Bias**," where players maintain a sense of self-worth and continue to feel good about themselves. Important for confidence, a vital factor in sports success and something any coach needs to be aware of.

However, it becomes apparent that over time, players and coaches need to be honest and objective in their attribution of factors. Might the losing player have reasoned that the real cause of the loss was that, despite a great deal of luck in the earlier rounds, the opponent in the final was a far stronger player with a greater range of shots? ie lack of ability was the real cause.

Might the winner have attributed luck of the weather as the main factor in the outcome?  
 Something which certainly cannot be relied on to help in all future events.

High Achievers and Low Achievers

As players participate regularly, a pattern tends to emerge towards achieving success often or less so. This itself can be a determinant of success as it boosts or detracts from self-confidence, a strong cause of outcomes in many a sports contest. Someone has the winning habit and so expects to win again and again. **Confidence and momentum are without question highly significant factors in success.** For such successful and high achieving competitors a minor setback won't negatively detract from self-worth to any real extent.

HIGH ACHIEVER	LOW ACHIEVER
Attributes success to internal and long-lasting factors and failure to external (uncontrollable and short-term) factors. Will persevere in the face of failure and expect success to reassert itself next time	Attributes success to external factors and failure to internal. Tendency to self-doubt and avoid activities which "put him on the line," risking failure and causing yet another damaging blow to the ego.

The Role of The Coach

The coach has a vital part to play by working with the player in the correct attribution of causes regarding performance, and in maintaining a positive self-belief within the player for long-term participation, involvement, optimum success and enjoyment of the sport.

By working with together, taking time to look honestly causes of results and agreeing realistic goals to work on in order to make future progress, the player and coach partnership is operating efficiently.

1. When failure occurs, the player must assume personal responsibility in order to improve and influence future outcomes. Failure should not habitually be assigned to external and unstable causes which cannot be controlled or altered just to maintain a superficial, temporary and dishonest sense of self-worth.
2. However, there are certain controllable external factors which can be worked on through training, eg it wasn't lack of ability which lost that match; it was due to lack of the right preparation and training. Coach and player can improve on this together.
3. Setbacks can be profitable. They can be analysed, learnt from and used as springboards to develop a more positive mindset and motivate future success.
4. Success can be profitable. Although confidence is a great asset to any sports participant, beware of false or over-confidence. It doesn't pay to develop over-confidence after a success which may sometimes be largely attributed to external factors (not under your control, nor long-lasting). It's tempting to think that all's OK after a win, but there may often remain things to learn from and improve on by the winner as well as the loser.

5. ATTRIBUTION RETRAINING is a term used whereby a player's view of the outcome can be altered in a beneficial way. A factor considered uncontrollable can be reassessed to be viewed as controllable and changeable.

eg Player: "I lost because I'm just not a good enough player at this level."

Coach: "No, the loss was due to lack of training and experience; we can work together to achieve progress in both respects. You do have the ability"

Future participation (training and competing) is then looked forward to with enthusiasm, confidence and optimism.

Conversely, there may be the player who needs reassuring that a win was due to other factors rather than luck on the day, when the opponent was struggling with injury.

Coach: "No, you were going to win that match anyway. You were the better player and had prepared well. It was good to see that you didn't allow the opponent's injury to disturb your concentration or that you let up in your effort and determination to win."

6. One of the more difficult tasks of a coach here is when the player continues to protect personal self-worth by most often attributing success, not to any of those external/environmental factors out of his control eg "luck of the bounce" on the day, but to other long term assets and attributes which he would like to have. Such players may not see the need to improve and develop, and might be heading for a fall!

Careful handling of a player's delicate ego may be needed as he/she must honestly be made to see that, despite some success, there are essential aspects of performance/mental attitude needing improvement ie "Actually, you might not as good as you tell yourself you are," but "We can get you there!" (breaking down in order to rebuild more strongly)

Finally it might be useful to list those attributes identified as the **MAIN FACTORS IN DETERMINING OUTCOME IN SPORT:**

- Player ability (natural and stable ie long-term)
- Effort, determination/motivation to succeed \*
- Focus and concentration during competition\*
- Training, preparation and current skill level\*
- Luck
- Task difficulty

(\* under control and changeable by a strong and efficient player/coach partnership)

C. Garratt

2020

NB: This area of Psychology is generally referred to as, "Attribution Theory." It has significant importance to those looking at performance and achievement in the field of sport.