

Choosing to Lose: The Psychology of Complaining

By Steve Gedon

Referees today have available to them a variety of tools and strategies to acknowledge and diffuse the complaints and criticisms that come from frustrated and confused coaches, players and fans. Over time referees learn to recognize these not-so-subtle verbal jabs as both an emotional response to competition and an attempt to influence future decisions, usually referred to as ‘working’ the officials. But a closer look reveals an often ignored side effect on the morale and motivation of the team they are intended to support. Over the years I have watched the psychological impact of complaining deteriorate the mental focus of players and their ability to ‘keep their head in the game’. While coaches and fans often enjoy this emotional aspect of the game, I believe we would all do well to consider its unintended consequences on game performance.

When it comes to complaining, officials quickly learn a simple rule of thumb: “*losing teams tend to complain more.*” This is not particularly surprising especially when coaches and players search for a convenient way to vent their frustrations, justify poor performance, and deflect responsibility. When viewed solely at the end of the game, however, it is easy to overlook the effect criticism had on the mental focus of the players while the outcome was still in question. In the midst of a closely contested match when emotions are running high, the intensity of the criticism is not always a response to losing but may shift morale just enough to produce it.

Even if losing teams do complain more, coaches and players need to seriously consider whether the corollary is also true: “*complaining teams tend to lose more.*” This leads to an interesting question: which comes first? It has been my experience that there are unintended psychological consequences from complaining that create a losing attitude, inhibits learning and drains enthusiasm. When coaches and players complain to the officials during a game they do so in an attempt to deflect responsibility and rationalize away the mistakes they will only continue to make. This is, of course, the exact opposite of what is necessary for creative, adaptive behavior to occur. Since all teams are faced with unknowns in the course of play, successful teams will learn to adapt quickly to different levels of play by learning from their mistakes.

This is not to say, of course, that officials are above reproach or that criticism is never valid, far from it. Referees, just like everyone else, need to pursue excellence in the sport they manage through regular reviews, training, and assessments. It is when the criticism becomes a convenient escape that referees need to be careful not to step into a minefield of misguided accusations.

Learning & Adaptation

When players and coaches blame the officials for a play that did not go as expected it immediately creates a mental smokescreen or fog which distracts players from the real mistakes that are being made in positioning or execution. This psychological fog prevents creative learning from taking place by hiding the real cause of the problem. Every competitive sport requires some level of adaptation to the opponent’s skill level and the overall team strategy. Complaining interrupts the player’s view of current reality and inserts the official as a distraction. When players find a convenient scapegoat, they effectively give up their power to change. Many referees have watched helplessly as a frustrated player becomes so fixated on the officials that they fail to see their part in the mistakes they continue to make.

A good coach, however, will turn any mistake into a teachable moment and extract from every loss the last nugget of learning possible. Coaches who blame and criticize officials as an easy scapegoat, however, squander a golden opportunity to improve the team’s level of play by encouraging personal accountability and an honest

assessment of the team's performance. Only by accepting and confronting mistakes openly and honestly can players see where they can improve and avoid the inevitable cycle of accusations common when playing the "blame game."

Attitude & Motivation

Prior to the start of every match, coaches typically give some kind of pep-talk designed to elevate their player's mental attitude through positive reinforcement. Coaches review their game plan, focus on the teams' strengths, and inspire players to believe in themselves with a solid "can-do" attitude. It is the underdogs that we admire who persevere against all odds, who believe in themselves, and who ultimately find a way to win that keeps fans cheering enthusiastically and makes competition so rewarding.

But for teams and coaches that complain to relieve stress, that "can-do" attitude is quickly squandered on the "woe-is-me" attitude. The confidence that started the game quickly evaporates when players hear from the bench or from the stands a constant stream of negativity that is both demeaning and laced with self-pity. I have seen numerous teams simply wilt under the weight of criticism from an angry coach or fans who argue incessantly about every play. The message players hear is clear, "we can't win against these odds." Complaining then becomes an excuse and a slow bleed of much needed enthusiasm and hope.

In 2006 following a loss to Stoke City, West Bromwich Albion's manager Tony Mowbray remarked, "*We should be good enough not to be complaining about a penalty.*" This unique perspective challenges players to rise above the "blame game" and focus on the whole game, not just one play out of a hundred. It encourages players to see every mistake for what it is, another opportunity to improve.

Transference

The psychology of blame involves how and to whom we choose to assign fault. Losing teams will even assign blame to neutral objects like the field conditions, the ball, the wind, anything and everything including their own teammates rather than accept responsibility. When we place blame on others it confuses where the real solutions can be found and makes the obstacles appear twice as big as they really are. In fact, many coaches and players become so focused on the officials they spend more time "working" the officials than working from their own strengths and game plan. This transference of energy and focus has cost more games than it will ever win.

By consistently calling a fair, impartial game and avoiding getting drawn into emotional arguments with irate coaches, officials can remove themselves as pawns in the "blame game", reduce the negativity and help teams maintain their focus on their own level of play. By taking a 'no-blame' attitude, coaches can inspire their teams to play at a higher level, to learn continually, and to see mistakes as an opportunity to improve. Players who accept responsibility for what happens on the field generally will improve their skill faster, possess a positive attitude about the game, avoid burnout, and generally have more fun. Above all they will learn important skills necessary to succeed in all aspects of life.

While it is certainly tempting to vent our frustration on whoever or whatever we can, complaining and shifting blame leaves players in a deeper hole of confusion and disappointment, out of which few can climb.

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