

The Art of Mental Training

Chapter 11

On Losing

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(Following several months of investigation, the shooter from the previous story was later apprehended and convicted, the incompetent supervisory agent was forced out, and my partner Jake, received another commendation.)

Mental athletes understand that they can't always control what takes place during an event. Things don't always go the way we'd like, no matter however well (and however hard) we've prepared. How we deal with that reality—and how we choose to look at the situation—always affects what lies ahead for us.

So, even though we can't always control the way things unfold, at least we can always control the way we respond to the event. Mental warriors focus on what they can control, not on the “what if's” or the “if only's.” Being able to choose how one responds to an unwelcome event is a critical skill. It has everything to do with how well we get on with our game—and even with our lives.

Mental athletes know that nobody wins all of the time. Not in life, not in sports. When things don't go their way they know it's OK to be disappointed. What's not OK is dwelling on the disappointment.

Champions keep it in perspective. They are able to accept responsibility and recognize the situation as a temporary setback nothing more, nothing less. Yes it hurts, so they look at it, learn from it, and then let it go. I've lost myself, of course. In fact, that was how I met Leo-tai in the first place . . .

I was young martial artist competing in tournaments and I'd just lost a major international competition—worse still, one that I'd been really expecting to win. I was having a tough time with the loss.

People kept telling me, “You still did great!”— But runner-up wasn't what I'd wanted to be. As time went by in response to my annoyance with myself, my training tailed off, my determination flagged, and everything seemed either too boring or too difficult to fuss about. I was slacking off.

I remember an older kid asking me once if I had ever heard of Coach Leo.

"I don't think so," I said. "What does he teach?"

"Mostly Shaolin—Chinese Kickboxing, but he teaches other things too. He really helped me once with my training."

"So how'd he help then?" I asked, interested.

"Call him, here's his number. He only teaches small classes. Tell him you know me."

I carried that sheet of paper around with me for about two weeks. Finally I thought, "Well, what have I got to lose? I called him and told him about myself. Coach Leo listened quietly on the phone, so much so that I began to wonder if he'd wandered off or hung up.

"Come tomorrow," he told me, and that ended our conversation.

When the next day came, I almost didn't go. I kept asking myself; why did I call this coach? I was looking for a reason to miss our appointment. But before I knew it (and despite my best efforts to talk myself out of it) I wound up knocking on his door and then there he was. A medium-sized, elderly, rather stoic figure, his face calm and genuine.

"Danielsan," he said, and paused.

"Daniel what?"

"Danielsan. You look very much like your older brother, please come in." He said.

"You knew my brother?" I asked. Then suddenly I realized that I had indeed heard of Coach Leo before! Only I had never heard him called that because my brother had always called him Leo-tai . . . As far back as I can remember, Leo-tai had always taught my older brother how to fight. My brother was teaching me when he was drafted and sent to Vietnam. After we lost him in the war, as I grew up I'd often found myself wondering about Leo-tai. And now, as fate would have it, so many years later, here he was in front of me, my brother's old instructor. Was this a coincidence? Head spinning, I stepped inside. I looked around. He appeared to live as simply as a monk.

Somehow I found it easy to be honest with him, knowing how my brother had loved him. After some tea, and having brought him up to date with the narrative of my tournament loss, I finished. He smiled and then spoke.

"This loss—you must let it go. True champions keep such a loss in perspective." He said. "You must look at it long enough to learn from it—but then you must let it go."

Easier said than done I thought, but what a powerful idea just the same. "Let it go." I let his advice sink in.

Let it go, I told myself, and I slowly began to allow the weight of the loss to get lifted from my shoulders.

Learn from it—and let it go. What could be simpler, or more healing, than that?

But he wasn't finished with me yet. He leaned forward as if to make sure I was paying attention.

"Remember that champions never play the blame game. They pick themselves up and start working on what's coming up next. They hold their heads high, even when that isn't easy to do. They push themselves to move forward. They know that this is how it has to be . . . They never forget that, if you don't fail sometimes, then you probably aren't challenging yourself at a high enough level. I want you to pick yourself up Danielsan; I want you to persist. Once you are ready to do so, then come back."

At the door, he said with a smile, "Never forget that setbacks or tough losses are really just a good opportunity for a great comeback."

That was the beginning of my friendship with Leo-tai. I remember leaving his simple home that night and thinking of how glad I was at having found my brother's teacher so many years later. I was still only a teenager; and I knew that I was just at the beginning—but I'll never forget the feeling I had as I walked back the way that I had come, the feeling of knowing somehow that my life had just taken an unexpected and most interesting turn.

Remember: Champions focus on what they can control. They know that while they can't always control what takes place during an event, they can always control how they respond to an event. A tough setback is nothing more than an opportunity for a great comeback.