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The Power of Negative Thinking for Junior Cyclists

As coaches, you certainly have your own philosophy and methods for developing your junior cyclists. Your approach is most likely tried and true, but if you haven't considered "the power of negative thinking", it's something that you shouldn't ignore.

Recently I read Coach Bobby Knight's book **The Power Of Negative Thinking - An Unconventional Approach to Achieving Positive Results**. The colorful former collegiate men's basketball coach gives his views and philosophy making the argument for realistic preparation in sports and in life as a remedy to blind optimism and wishful thinking. Perhaps you aren't a fan of Coach Bobby Knight. I admit that years ago I wasn't crazy about his antics when he coached the Indiana Hoosiers men's basketball team, but since I've entered the coaching professional, I've gained an appreciation for his "old-school" approach to discipline, excellence, and teaching.

Coach Knight's methodology to preparation is a contrast to Norman Vincent Peale's **The Power of Positive Thinking**, a classic bestseller that inspired millions of Americans with an optimistic perspective. Coach Knight explains why "negative thinking" will actually produce more positive results, in sports and in daily life. His coaching philosophy was to instill discipline by "preparing to win" rather than hoping to win.

Having read his book, I agree with many of Coach Bobby Knight's views and methods. I believe it's worth consideration regardless on your technique. His approach is founded on the premise that the greatest leaders anticipate and prepare for a negative scenario. "They succeed by expecting things to go wrong at any moment, and by building a realistic strategy that takes all potential obstacles into account." His thoughts echo many of our teachings in developing our junior cyclists to prepare them for success in racing.

In particular, Coach Knight's focus on the preparing for the future and deemphasizing the past hits home. His basketball teams were very successful. Even so, he made sure they didn't dwell on their successes, but rather looked immediately to the challenges of the next game. Similarly, we instruct our juniors to always focus on the future. We tell the members of our team, "You're only as good as your **next** race. Once the race is over, it does not matter how you finished or what happened in the race. Look forward to the **next** race." We preach that there's always room for improvement. We say, "Look forward... You can make improvements whether you finished first or last."

Looking forward is actually more difficult for the successful athletes to accept than those who may have been dropped in the first turn. Why do so many the successful athletes want to dwell on their achievements instead of concentrating on improving for the future? In part, it's natural to savor accomplishments, but equally, "enablers" can reinforce their inability to look forward. These "successful" kids hear over and over "how great they are" from enablers, who include parents, friends, peers, and, yes, even coaches. Certainly, we expect repeated praises from proud parents; once again, it's natural. Parents' praises are often are discounted by their children, especially teenagers, but the others can have a great impact on egos. Social media is a big player in this phenomenon. It's a fixture in this generation and it's a powerful enabler tool.

What can easily happen for the successful athlete is to develop a false sense of importance. We've discussed this phenomenon in past columns. If you've read those columns, you will recall that we call it "creating a **monster**". Indeed, "monsters" have difficulty accepting a dose of reality because they can find so many who give nothing but praise. For these juniors whose egos rely of adulations, there's a risk that "negative thinking" may alienate them. It can become problematic to the point where they may ignore you or even quit their team. Getting these kids grounded and focused on the future is crucial for their development as cyclists and for their adulthood. If you can't motivate these youngsters to raise their bar, they are at risk of facing huge disappointments that may cause them to leave the sport. Furthermore, this inability can limit their maturity to becoming well-adjusted young adults. We've witnessed this situation on other teams and, admittedly, on our team, too. For our program, we were fortunate to make an association with a sports psychologist a few years ago, who is helpful in resolving these issues. We recommend that you don't rely on luck – find a professional to work with your juniors.

Our methodology of "negative thinking" is similar in many ways to Coach Bobby Knight's approach. But since reading his book, I found that Coach Knight isn't the only proponent of "negative thinking". There is psychological research that shows that "negative thinking" brings about better results for goal achievement. In his 99u.com article, "The Power of Negative Thinking", Dr. Christian Jarrett reports on Gabriele Oettingen's (Professor of Psychology) whose psychology lab at New York University has shown that visualizing our aims as already achieved can backfire. The positive imagery can be inspiring at first but it can trick the mind into relaxing, as if the hard work is done. Her research shows that mentally

contrasting a desired future outcome with present reality leads to the occurrence of binding goals and goal achievement. "By thinking realistically about the obstacles to success, it helps us pick challenges that we're likely to win and avoid wasting time."

To summarize "negative thinking", I think it's best described by Coach Knight who quotes his grandmother's words, "If wishes were horses, beggars would ride." Now that quote says it all!