

Mindset

Are champions born or made?

What do **you** need to do to become a world class athlete or coach in your sport?

We believe that in addition to physical, technical and psychological skills your **mindset** towards sport is vital to your success.

What is mindset?

Mindset is a belief about your ability and where it comes from. Carol Dweck, an educational psychologist, found that the key to achieving your potential is not ability level or talent: it is your belief about ability. You either believe that abilities are natural and need to be demonstrated or that abilities are traits that can be developed.

Sport talks a lot about talent as if it is an inherited trait. That is, you are talented or you are not. Sports select athletes from a young age using their current performance as a measure of 'talent'. This is based on the assumption that current performance is a good measure of potential. HOWEVER, this is just not true. It is VERY difficult to measure potential and to identify who will succeed. The sporting world is littered with 'talented' juniors who do not succeed at the senior level. Similarly, there are many world champions and Olympic medallists who won very little at junior level.

"People say I have a great talent, but in my opinion excellence has nothing to do with talent. It is about what you choose to believe and how determined you are to get there. The mind is more powerful than anything else"

Michael Phelps. 2009



Mindset is really a belief about what the sporting world calls talent and Dweck has identified two types of mindset: **fixed** and **growth**. While both mindsets are common, they have different effects on how people learn.

If you have a more **fixed** mindset you believe that your abilities are natural (perhaps inherited). You have a certain amount of ability and that cannot be changed. You are sporty or you are not. This belief about natural talent can be

reinforced if you feel you ‘naturally’ pick up some skills easily or if you feel you lack talent because you take longer than others to learn new things.

If you have a more **fixed** mindset you might be nervous about learning difficult skills because failure to learn quickly suggests that you don’t have enough talent. This can be very threatening to self-confidence. If you have failed once you believe that you will fail again and this fear of failure can stop you trying.

If you have a more **growth** mindset you believe that abilities can be developed through learning and hard work. It can make life easier if you are physically suited to a certain sport but you still need to work hard and continue to learn to achieve your goals. With a **growth** mindset you see failures as learning opportunities and believe that maximising your potential requires a lot of consistent hard work.

With a **growth** mindset you are more likely to try new things and work hard to overcome obstacles. Failure is not seen as a lack of talent and therefore is not permanent. Rather than, “I can’t do that”, with a **growth** mindset you would say “I can’t do that YET”.

This belief (or mindset) then affects how you train and perform. It affects how you set goals and how you evaluate goals. It even affects how you interpret feedback from your coach. Knowing about mindset can help you to get the most out of yourself.

The table below summarises some of differences in behaviour that you might recognise in more **growth** or **fixed** mindset athletes and coaches.

	Fixed Mindset	Growth Mindset
Leads to...	...a desire to show off talent and therefore a tendency to...	...a desire to learn and therefore a tendency to...
Challenges	...avoid challenges	...embrace challenges
Setbacks	...give up easily	...persist in the face of setbacks
Effort	...see effort as fruitless of worse	...see effort as the path to mastery
Criticism	...ignore useful negative feedback	...learn from criticism
Failurereflects a lack of talent	..is a learning opportunity
Potential	...is measured by current performance (e.g. PB or current skills)	...cannot be measured
Success of others	...feel threatened by the success of others	...find lessons and inspiration from the success of others
As a result...	May plateau early and “under achieve”	Reach ever higher levels of achievement

Think about what you believe and consider the following questions;

- Are you sporty?
- Are you musical?
- Are you creative?
- Are you good at maths?

For each of these questions ask: WHY or WHY NOT?

Did you mention talent, that you just naturally picked things up quickly or that it was 'in your genes'? Or did you feel you have always focused on putting the effort in? Hopefully you are starting to think about whether your answers indicate a talent or effort focus and what this might say about your mindset.

Where does our mindset come from?

Your mindset can be influenced by your experiences. That is, your successes and your failures, your response to these, and the responses of people around you. If you are constantly told that you are talented and praised for your talent, you are likely to believe that you are talented. That is quite normal. If you are praised for being a "natural" then you will probably believe that you have an inbuilt "gift" for a particular sport. Again, this is a normal response that fits the way that most people understand talent and sporting ability. This belief about talent is more likely to lead to a more **fixed** mindset. The danger is that you might rely on your talent rather than building an understanding of how to improve and training hard.



If you are praised for working hard to develop your skills then you are more likely to see value in that. If you are encouraged to find a way to overcome the setbacks and failures that will help you to achieve your goal then you will see the value in working hard. This is more likely to lead to a **growth** mindset. You tend not to rely on talent. You have relied on hard work for your success and that is what you understand.

To help understand your beliefs about talent and ability write down the *skills that are most important* for elite performance in your sport. For example: decision-making, technical skills etc. Then draw a line like the one below and make a mark to show whether you think that being good at this skill is about natural talent or about effort and experience.

Decision making *Natural* ← x → *Effort / Experience*

The mark on the line above suggests that you feel decision making is more of a natural ability than an ability that can be learnt through effort and experience. Repeat this exercise for all the key skills in your sport and then think about what experiences have shaped you to think in this way. Have you been praised for being talented or working hard? Do you think others excel at the same skills through natural talent or hard work and experience? We believe that you can get better at any skill. You might not know exactly *how* to get better yet but you can improve. What do your ratings suggest about your mindset in key areas of development?

How can mindset help me?

The evidence shows that your mindset is linked to what you achieve. We think that mindset explains the athletes who achieved “beyond their potential”. Potential and talent wasn’t important to them. Their goal was to improve at their sport and they continued to work out how to improve and continued to train hard and smart.

We also think that mindset can explain the talented athlete who reaches a certain point and stops improving. If things have come easily athletes often know less about the process of development or how to work hard to improve. Failure hurts their confidence and they stop trying. Having never had to work hard to learn skills can lead to giving up easily and underachieving. Can you think of people who fit into either group?

In order to explain **fixed** and **growth** mindsets it is tempting to suggest that you are one or the other. What is more likely is that there is line from **growth** to **fixed** and you move along that line depending on your experiences and the particular ability we are talking about. So, you might firmly believe that with hard work you can get better at kicking a football (**growth** mindset) and at the same time you might believe that you cannot learn how to ‘read a game’ (**fixed** mindset).

Understanding when your behaviour may be more **fixed** or more **growth** is important to help you recognise how to develop your skills more effectively. If you know why you might seek or avoid a challenge, then you can learn from the experience.

"I've missed more than 9000 shots in my career. I've lost almost 300 games. 26 times, I've been trusted to take the game winning shot and missed. I've failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed".

Michael Jordan



If you approach sport with a **growth** mindset you are likely to be focussed on being the best that you can be, training hard and learning as much as you can. You seek to learn from everyone: coaches, other athletes, different sports, and high achievers in other areas (e.g. musicians). You set your own goals and control your programme (your coach or others might help). You know that you cannot predict what you will achieve with years of dedicated and purposeful training. Your challenge is to understand where you are now and HOW you can improve.

Mindset and sport: My behaviours

Do you display growth mindset behaviours such as those mentioned above in your training and competition? We believe that there are four types of mindset behaviours that are particularly relevant in sport (remembering that your mindset can vary and you can choose to change it). The four types of behaviours are:

<i>Challenges</i>	Do you embrace them <i>or</i> avoid them?
<i>Setbacks</i>	Do you persist when things go wrong <i>or</i> go back and focus on what you can do?
<i>Criticism</i>	Accept and learn from it <i>or</i> ignore it?
<i>Ownership</i>	I am responsible <i>or</i> my coach/manager is responsible?

Choose one of these types of behaviours (e.g. setbacks) and write down a time in your sport when you:

- a) persisted in the face of a setback
- b) gave up on something new and went back to what you were good at

Repeat this exercise for the remaining 3 areas and remember to write down a time when you showed a **fixed** mindset in your behaviour and when you showed a **growth** mindset. Hopefully this will help you to see that there are times when you are more **fixed** and times when you are more **growth** mindset.

Can mindset be changed?

Yes it can! Now that you know about **fixed** and **growth** mindsets you can challenge your beliefs to help improve your performance.

Your mindset will affect how you think and how you think will affect what you do. So, to change your mindset you will need to change how you think and importantly how this thinking is reflected in what you do. For example, your coach has asked you to learn a new skill that looks complicated.

If you have a **fixed** mindset you might think: “that looks complicated and if I cannot learn it quickly the coach will doubt my ability”. This thought might lead to fear and you might then avoid practicing the new skill so that the coach will not see you fail.

If you have a **growth** mindset you might think: “that looks complicated and I probably won’t be able to learn that quickly. But if I keep trying, and with the help of the coach I will get there”. This thought might lead to some initial frustration as you learn (failure is not fun even with a **growth** mindset!) but over time you consistently practice the new skill until you master it.

Which type of behaviour do you think will help you most in the long-term? Once you can identify the types of messages YOU are sending, you can label them as **fixed** or **growth** mindset oriented. You can then challenge any **fixed** mindset thoughts. Remember, YOU HAVE A CHOICE about your thinking!

The next section provides you with some practical activities to help you understand how you can use mindset in your daily training environment.

1. Set mindset goals

Set some goals around what you want to achieve. If you tend to ignore criticism your goal might be:

Goal	Behaviour/actions	Outcome - Reflection
“Listen to ALL feedback (positive and negative) to find what I can learn from it”.		

If you have been avoiding challenges by working on your strengths your goal might be:

Goal	Behaviour/actions	Outcome - Reflection
“To work hard on an area that I might not be good at YET but that could make a difference to my performance”.		

Make sure that you are really specific about the area you choose and how improvements might impact on performance (e.g. pre-shot routine, scanning the field, kicking etc). Whichever goal you choose, we recommend that you write it down *and* share it with your coach or mentor.

2. Change your behaviour

What was your goal? Write down the actions that you will need to take to reach that goal. That is, what are you going to do differently? For example,

Goal	Behaviour/actions	Outcome - Reflection
Taking greater ownership of the development process	I will set a training goal for each session (technical and physical) and rate myself on that goal. When possible I will also get the coach to rate me. I will aim for the coach to rate me at one training session per fortnight.	

Set a time limit for the change in behaviour, say about 6 weeks. Then at the end of the 6 weeks, decide whether the change that you made has been helpful or not and use that information to set a new goal. This is outlined in the reflection step below. Keep repeating this process indefinitely.

3. Reflection

This is where you evaluate your progress towards your goal. Ask yourself:

- What was my goal?
- What did I do differently to achieve my goal?
- Did it work? Why or why not?
- What now? Do I need to take different actions to reach my goal, do I need a new goal, or do I need more of the same (it is working, but I am not there yet)?

For example,

Goal	Behaviour/actions	Outcome - Reflection
Taking greater ownership of the development process	I will set a training goal for each session (technical and physical) and rate myself on that goal. When possible I will also get the coach to rate me. I will aim for the coach to rate me at one training session per fortnight.	I set a goal for most of my training sessions and rated myself each time I set a goal. I did not get the coach to rate me. I found that I was more focussed when I had a training goal. I will continue to set goals and talk to my coach to see if they will rate my performance on agreed goals.

This is a continual process. If you need some help with choosing the changes to make in your behaviour and in evaluating your progress, speak to your coach or someone who knows you and your sport well.

Good luck!

Reading list

We have included below some books which are easy to read and will help to give you more information and get you thinking about talent:

- *Mindset* by Carol Dweck
- *Bounce* by Matthew Syed
- *The Talent Code* by Daniel Coyle
- *Talent is Overrated* by Geoff Colvin
- *Outliers* by Malcolm Gladwell