

Flush & Park Mistakes with a Mistake Ritual

Once a player makes a mistake in public (and the playing field, even with only a few spectators present, is a very public venue for youth athletes), they are no longer in the moment. Their negative self-talk kicks in and they begin to berate themselves silently for making a mistake. They are usually not ready to make the next play.

A mistake ritual is a gesture and statement that individuals use to ward off the fear of making mistakes so they don't play timidly. A mistake ritual allows athletes to quickly "reset" and get ready for the next play or decision without wallowing in the past and beating themselves up for having made a mistake.

There are many mistake rituals, but here are some that we especially like. One is "Flushing Mistakes." When your athlete makes a mistake on the playing field, you can simply put your hand above your shoulder and make a motion like you are flushing a toilet. You can add commentary to the flush: "It's okay, Omar. Flush it. Next play."

Another mistake ritual is "No Sweat." This involves swiping two fingers across one's forehead like you were flicking sweat from your brow. Do this with your athlete after a mistake and add, "No sweat. Forget it and get ready for the next play!" Or you can yell "brush it off" while using a hand motion of brushing something off your shoulder.

The power of a Mistake Ritual is well documented. The "flush" played a major role in Louisiana State University's successful quest for the 2009 NCAA baseball title.

- Ryan Schimpf after hitting a homerun in the Super Regional to beat Rice:
"I had two terrible at-bats previously and I just tried to flush it."
- Pitcher Anthony Ranaudo after a bad outing against Virginia: "I just have to be able to flush it mentally and go out there with a new attitude and approach." He then allowed only 4 hits in 6 shutout innings to defeat Arkansas in the College World Series.
- LSU Head Coach Paul Mainieri after losing to Texas in the finals:
"This just wasn't our night. We have to flush this loss and come out ready to play for the national championship on Wednesday night" (which they won). And the pitcher who picked up the win in the final game? Frequent flusher Anthony Ranaudo.

Cal State Fullerton also used a mistake ritual to turn around a dismal season in which they were 15-16 mid-way through the season to help them win the 2004 NCAA baseball title. Evan Longoria and other hitters on the Tampa Bay Rays rely on the flush to help them improve their batting. And the 2000 USA Olympic Softball Team not only flushed their bad games, they all got in the shower with their uniforms on to wash away the mistakes after their third loss in a row. With their backs to the wall, they won five straight games to win the Gold Medal in Sydney.

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Flush & Park Mistakes with a Mistake Ritual, continued

Baseball and softball lend themselves especially well to mistake rituals, but the tool works in any sport. A hockey goalie once told me that after every goal scored against him he pictures the goal, decides whether he was out of position or if there was anything he could have done to stop the puck, then bangs his stick against the metal bar of the goal to focus on the next play.

A mistake ritual may be the most powerful tool you as a Double-Goal Coach have because mistakes are what youth athletes worry about most. If you reduce fear of making mistakes, more energy will be available to learn and excel at the game.

Parking Mistakes: Many coaches have problems telling players it's okay to make a mistake because it seems like a violation of good teaching. When a player makes a mistake, it is the coach's responsibility to correct it. This is where the idea of a Parking Lot comes in.

When a player makes a mistake in a game you want to remember it so you can prepare the player for a better outcome next time. But in a game the moment after a mistake is not a teachable moment for most youth athletes.

At that moment, the most important thing a Double-Goal Coach can do is to help a player continue competing, which is what a mistake ritual does. You make a note of the mistake without saying anything about it at the time, and "park" it where you will remember it after the game so you can address it in practice.

When you think about the mistake later, you can try to understand why the athlete made the mistake. It could be he was never adequately taught it. Perhaps it was taught, but she didn't understand what you asked her to do. Maybe the skill is a complex one and he hasn't mastered it physically although he understands what you want him to do.

Often, a player can perform an action until fatigue sets in which can open the floodgates for mistakes late in competitions. Sometimes nervousness causes a player to muff something she can do easily in practice. Rarely does a player understand what you have asked him to do and choose to intentionally disregard your wishes, although this may happen once in a blue moon.

If you think about the various reasons mistakes happen, a mistake ritual helps your players perform better in a game no matter why they made the mistake.

Talk with your team about the importance of not being afraid of mistakes, discuss what mistake ritual they would like to use. Then encourage your players to use the ritual in competition. This is a powerful concept with lifetime implications. And it will help your team be more successful on the scoreboard!