

# THE OVERPRAISED ATHLETE:

## *Too Much of a Good Thing?*

By Caroline Silby, Ph.D.

The athletes you are coaching today are being raised differently than the previous generation and I'm fairly certain it's changing your approach to coaching. The days of chasing your students around the ice with guard in hand to get them to skate faster are long gone. In fact, today telling them that their performance stunk may put you at risk of being fired. Lessons filled with circling and popping of jumps propel you to take some serious disciplinary action but doing so may lead to accusations of being a poor motivator, inexperienced, uncaring and worst of all a coach who doesn't build self-esteem.

You think it's you and your inability to communicate effectively with your skating parents which, let's face it is likely true. Yet, the reality is that you are coaching children that in great numbers are being raised in a fundamentally different manner. This generation of children is "overed"—overpressured, overscheduled and OVERPRAISED.

### OVERPRAISED CHILDREN

Children today are complimented over and over again. Sometimes because they have earned the heartfelt and genuine praise and other times because many parents believe that building self-esteem is about praising children for their talent and intelligence while simultaneously protecting them from feelings of inadequacy, doubt and failure.

To this end, home life revolves around 10 year olds driving decisions about everything from whether they feel like making their beds to whether they feel like listening to their coaches. Coach-athlete interactions have turned into what look like therapy sessions on ice. Parents have become afraid of disciplining their children at home and coaches are trying to talk these children into listening to and respecting authority. How is that working for you?

### RESEARCH

There has been a growing body of research on the effects of over praising children including groundbreaking work by Carol Dweck. Over praised children become fearful of failure, avoidant

of challenging situations, sensitive to criticism and locked in a cycle of preserving the "appearance" of success or potential others see in them. Beyond that, Roy Baumeister's review of 200 studies on self-esteem concluded that having high self-esteem didn't improve grades or career achievement. In fact, "unrealistic self-appraisals" can lead to aggression, violence and crime.

### FACTUAL APPRAISALS

As a coach, you are one of the most powerful influencers in a young person's life. When it comes to skating, children need to be complimented for the controllable aspects of performance (i.e., focus, self-talk, anxiety management) rather than their talent or potential. When an athlete has a poor skate, it is your responsibility to acknowledge this. If you try to cover it up, you lose credibility with both athletes and parents and do a very real disservice to your position as coach. Glossing over mistakes and failure will simply lead children to think that failure is so bad that people important to them can't even acknowledge that it happened.

Now, don't get me wrong. I'm not advocating destroying athletes' hope or punishing them for making mistakes. You need to non-emotionally acknowledge the failure or errors and assist athletes in reframing and moving ahead from the experience.

### SYSTEMATIC RESPONSES

Begin to develop systematic ways in which you will handle the skating issues that can become battlegrounds (i.e., circling and popping, stopping during the program, emotional outbursts, disengagement etc). For example, you may decide that after a skater pops twice, they must a) interrupt the pattern by doing another element b) take a time-out to refocus c) take away the opportunity to work on that jump for the remainder of the lesson /session. Prior to implementing the system, be sure to discuss it with your skaters and their parents.

During a lesson, I would encourage you to limit the amount of time you spend discussing the issue (i.e. popping). In my years of experience, I have never seen an athlete respond to

on-ice discussion by saying, "I completely understand what you are saying, and now I will be open to learning." When these frustrating issues become patterns, they are worthy of discussion. Yet, productive problem solving is more likely to occur when people are rational rather than responding to the emotions of the moment.

### CONNECTING WITH ATHLETES


Many people do not realize that discipline can only be effective when a connection is present. Therefore, you do still need to recognize and seek opportunities to connect emotionally with your skaters. You can do so by acknowledging their thoughts and opinions and validating their feelings, especially the imperfect ones (i.e. anger, frustration, fear, doubt and isolation). This can be a simple comment like, "I know you are frustrated, and this is hard for you right now." Try to seize opportunities to recognize, appreciate and connect with other aspects of a skater's personality such as academics, friendships, family and spirituality. Your guidance and feedback affirms sport is only one aspect of a multidimensional life. This truth serves as a valuable balance to the pressures of competition.

### COMMUNICATING RATIONALES

Communicating and setting expectations with parents are critical actions that are often overlooked or ignored. Share with parents how you coach, how you discipline, how you motivate, etc. so they have an understanding of the rationale behind your actions. Encourage a collaborative relationship among coach, skater and parents by reminding all parties of your shared goals. At times, you may have conflict about how to meet these goals, but conflict negotiated effectively can deepen and strengthen relationships. Respond to skaters and parents rationally rather than emotionally. You are in a position to provide skaters with direction on how to strengthen their attitudes by modeling your own optimism. The way in which you manage frustration, deal with pressure, respond to negative events and refocus are constantly on display

### SUMMARY

By developing systematic plans for how you will handle the tough issues, you can begin to instill in your athletes respect for authority and responsibility. Limit setting and discipline can be draining, but you must be persistent and consistent. You will find that executing a system of discipline, that is agreed upon by all parties, gives you a better chance of controlling your own emotions and coaching in a manner that fits with your beliefs, values and ethical code. Coaching with this integrity is fulfilling, and you just might notice a positive affect on skaters' development, performance and even their self-esteem.

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### Pieter Kollen

As chair of the PSA Sport Science Committee, I am honored to announce that the PSA Sports Science Committee and the PSA

Board of Directors and the USFSA Board of Directors have voted to rename the PSA/USFSA Sport Science Coaching Award to the Pieter Kollen Sport Science Coaching Award. This award is presented to a "coach who utilizes scientific techniques as an integral part of his/her coaching." Pieter Kollen did much, much more than that.

As many of you are aware, Pieter B. "Iceman" Kollen 68, of Carmel, IN, passed away Sunday August 5, 2007. Pieter lived in Colorado Springs from 1964-1987 and was remembered in an article by Ralph Routon from the Colorado Springs Independent titled "Farewell to a Star of the Ice World":

Kollen was a brilliant creative presence in other ways, such as physiology, technology and training. He was on the cutting edge of analyzing the elements of jumps, showing skaters how technique and jumping height affected their success. Even in the 1960s, he developed power-skating methods to help hockey players with strength and endurance. Those methods earned him enough respect that he worked with the U.S. Olympic hockey teams of 1976 and 1980 (the Miracle on Ice bunch), and he continued directing power-skating camps until the end of his life. After moving to Indiana, Kollen added another title to his résumé: inventor. He conceived the K-Pick and Parabolic design for skating blades, both of which have made a difference for skaters everywhere.

From the Indiana World Skating Academy website: "Pieter was the 1962 U.S. Pairs champion and a two-time world-team member. In 1962, Mr. Kollen was a world team member in both pairs and ice dance. He had served as the Skating Director of the Indiana/World Skating Academy for 20 years and has helped countless students fulfill their promise as athletes. He was a gifted teacher of coaches and spent countless hours donating his time at conferences, seminars, and workshops sharing his knowledge and expertise with his peers. Pieter's warmth of spirit and encouraging words will be missed by all."

In the words of Mr. Routon of Colorado Springs, "That's why it's important to make sure Pieter Kollen's obituary isn't the last word. It said, simply, he was a skating coach. As anyone who ever knew him would confirm, he was so much more than that.

So long, Pete....this one's for you, dear friend."