



Flushing & Parking: The Short and Long of Mistake Rituals

By Roch King, Assistant Professor, Ball State University and PCA Senior Trainer

A common scene during the Double-Goal Coach workshop is when, after nodding in agreement for the first hour, attendees sit back and shake their heads' in disbelief. This moment is when "Mistakes are OK" is revealed under the Mastery Definition of Winner. "You can't just let them make the same mistake over and over," is a typical objection to the idea of mistakes being OK. If the Positive Coaching is really about having high standards, how can repeated mistakes be OK?

The answer to the question lies in examining WHY mistakes (especially repeated mistakes) occur. There are basically four causes for the mistakes that your athletes make:

- 1 They don't understand what you have asked them to do.**
- 2 They understand what you have asked them to do and choose not to do it.**
- 3 They understand what you have asked them to do mentally, but they are in the early stages of learning where they are more likely to do it incorrectly rather than correctly.**
- 4 They understand what you have asked them to do, but are not physically capable of doing it.**

Depending on the cause, there is a different approach that is most effective for dealing with the mistake. Discovering the cause of mistakes is the first step to dealing with them effectively. The PCA tool of "Ask, don't tell" is a great approach to determining the cause. If they can't tell you what they did wrong, they didn't understand what they were supposed to do. Cause 1 (not understanding) is probably the most common. These types of mistakes are actually signs that you have not completely communicated the message, and a different approach is necessary.

Despite what many coaches may think, it is rare for young athletes to consciously choose to disregard your instructions. However, after the other causes are ruled out, then the behavioral problem needs to be dealt with.

During the acquisition of any new skill, we all go through a period where we make more errors than correct responses. It is part of what is called the learning curve. For this type of error, the tool of the mistake ritual is very powerful. We gain mastery of new skills through repetition. Mistake Rituals, such as "The Flush," allow athletes to forget the error and quickly move to the next opportunity, without fearing consequences if they make another error. The more opportunities, the more quickly the skill will be learned and the errors will diminish.

There are some "mistakes", however, that should not be forgotten entirely. These are mistakes of preparation. An example would be athletes that are not conditioned well enough to continue to run hard during the fourth period of a game. These types of mistakes are best handled with a technique sometimes referred to as "Parking." With Parking, the mistake is put aside during periods that we can not work on correcting it (such as during the game), but remembered during the times that it can be worked on (the next practice).

Imagine going to a movie. Your car does you no good once you are in the theater, but you certainly want to remember where you put it once the show is over. Similarly, it serves no purpose to dwell on not being as fit as you could be, or as strong as you could be, or as prepared for the full-court press as you could be, while the game is going on. However, it also does you no good if you flush and forget these types mistakes and arrive at the next game just as under prepared. So Parking serves as a mental image for putting aside these types of errors. This allows for finding strategic short-term solutions for the problem, but also allows for re-addressing the problem at the next opportunity where you can actually do something about it. A parking ritual such a making a fist and moving it forward parallel with the floor (similar to the motion of moving the stick shift into park) can be used to accompany the mental image of putting the mistake in the parking lot to be retrieved later. An alternative parking ritual comes from one of my former students who closed his hand so that all his fingertips were touching and made a move up with his hand. When I asked what it meant, he said "it's like putting your gum under your desk so you know where to get it when class is over."

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