

That's Right!

But Don't Do It Again Today!

by Lynn Loar

Coaching has changed for the better in the decades that I've been skating. You rarely hear coaches shouting at children or children crying in the changing room after a harsh lesson — scenarios I remember vividly from my childhood summers in skating camp. People have learned that positive reinforcement motivates better than criticism. However, I've noticed that despite the best of intentions, an occasional negative sneaks in, often under the radar of even very skilled positive coaches.

A coach can unintentionally compromise the process of learning, despite using an exclusively positive approach. This comes about, ironically, because of the coach's expertise, focus and purposefulness. The coach may require the student to repeat a behavior many times, hoping for greater progress or the solidification of gains. The coach runs the risk of becoming focused on these aims and underestimating or missing the skater's signs of fatigue or waning enthusiasm. The coach is an expert whose vision, attention span and buy-in exceed the student's. And the student performing the behavior over and over is expending much more energy than the coach is. The coach's lack of punitive intent is irrelevant to the student, who now realizes that training sessions can be exhausting, even stressful and discouraging, despite the coach's positive enthusiasm.

Coaches of all sports run the risk of impeding their students' progress through excessive repetition of any behavior that requires both mental and physical attentiveness. For example,



landing an Axel is a benchmark for ice skaters. Things can go wrong in so many places — skaters can hesitate slightly during the preparation or at the take-off, lean a little to one side or the other, drop a shoulder, kick the free leg imprecisely, give insufficient pull to their arms, look down instead of up and into the jump, and on and on. Students really *want* to land an Axel and tend to work diligently toward that goal. And then, lo and behold, like magic, after months of work, they land an Axel!

Landing that first Axel is cause for celebration — announcements on

the rink's public address system and on Web pages, photos on camera phones, calls to grandparents — but *not for repetition*. Why *not* ask the skater to repeat it immediately to solidify the skill? Because the skater will not be able to land another Axel right away. As part of the normal vacillation, the ups and downs of acquiring skill on each component, everything serendipitously came together once *before the skater actually had sufficient technique and control to consistently execute the maneuver*.

The skater will not be able to repeat the Axel without more practice on each of its components. If asked to do it again, the skater will execute a poor encore and become discouraged. The coach, wary of ending on such a dismal note, will have no choice but to ask the skater to repeat the Axel again and again until another is landed. It will not be as good as the first, frustration and fatigue hav-

ing taken their toll, and the skater will leave discouraged at the ephemeral success that was eclipsed by another 25 or 30 failures.

Not landing an Axel if you've never landed one is not a failure. It is just *practicing*. If you *have* landed an Axel, *not* landing the next one is a failure. Thus, the overly purposeful coach has managed to grab failure from the jaws of success and wave it around the arena by having the skater try to repeat the triumph.

Why does this happen? Because the coach has a longer attention span, greater stamina (is exerting less physi-

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cal energy) and a more linear perspective than the student. The first time the student lands the Axel, the student is overachieving, performing beyond his/her ability. The success is a fluke. But what a great feeling! If the coach ends the practice of that skill with that triumph, and adds a bit of hoopla for effect, the skater leaves, chest swelled with pride, at this new ability to do the behavior. The student will come to the next lesson confident and eager, filled with the memory and the feeling of the success, and willing to do many repetitions to hit the target again.

If, instead, the coach asks the student to repeat the behavior right away, the student will try, and will do a poor job. The coach and now-discouraged student will have to dig in and repeat the behavior enough times for another success to occur. The student leaves demoralized, knowing he/she did two out of perhaps 50 or more repetitions correctly, a 4 percent success rate. And, the student will be ambivalent at the next lesson. Even though the coach has exclusively encouraged, the coach has nevertheless compromised the process by going beyond the student's likely success.

Learning curves look very different to the coach and the student. From a

larger perspective, the coach sees a fairly linear path toward the goal. The student, on the other hand, experiences a roller coaster of vacillations, and may not appreciate small incremental steps toward the goal that has not yet been reached. Landing an Axel is a clear triumph, and noteworthy even to the student who cannot see the topography of the forest for all the trees along the way. If the coach stops work on that specific skill at the top of each hill, the student will end each lesson on a high note despite his/her perception of a bumpy and unclear journey.

However, if the coach requires repetition beyond initial success, the student has a very different experience: Following the thrill of victory, the student flounders in the abyss of defeat until finally managing to do the behavior about half as well as the first successful one. From the student's perspective, failure dominates the session. The student leaves frustrated and fatigued, and estranged from the coach, whose vision of success and determination unwittingly damaged the student's experience.

As a positive coach, how do you avoid damaging the process? Overcome your eagerness to have the student

repeat behaviors done well the first time. *STOP* as soon as the student gets it right. This doesn't mean you stop the lesson, which can feel like punishment to the eager student (and annoy the parents, who think they're not getting their money's worth), but stop work on that particular skill, celebrate the achievement, and go to another activity that is very different. A well-paced lesson will therefore cover more behaviors and fewer repetitions of each behavior. At the end of each lesson, the student can bask in the glow of many successes in many different behaviors and confidently look forward to the next lesson with the purely positive coach.

An ISI member since 1985, Lynn Loar is a skating instructor at Winter Lodge in Palo Alto, Calif. She teaches beginning through advanced-level skills to skaters of all ages and abilities, as recreation, recreational therapy and as part of physical and occupational therapy treatment plans. She is the president of the Pryor Foundation, a multidisciplinary research and educational group devoted to developing and disseminating innovative applications of techniques to change behaviors exclusively through positive reinforcement (www.thepryorfoundation.org).

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