

The Improvement Mindset

It's a beautiful summer day and I'm at an annual campout in southern Minnesota. There are 27 of us, which means we have more than enough to organize two volleyball teams.

I hadn't played for some time. As I walked onto the court for the first game, some old, familiar thoughts started to flood my mind. How will it go this time? What if I'm faced with a strong server? I've never been consistent returning serves. What if someone spikes the ball right at me? I've never been very good at returning those either.

The first game started like all the others – some time spent dreading hard serves, and the rest of the time critiquing everything else. Eventually I noticed that I was caught in a not-so-helpful cycle that was building on itself and overtaking me. Said differently, I was practicing being self-critical.

Richard Strozzi-Heckler, an expert on leadership and mastery, says that humans are not capable of not practicing. In other words, we have a bent toward turning our actions into practices that we repeat over and over again. It is through our practicing that we form habits – good and bad. I wouldn't say that one day I decided to start a practice of criticizing myself. However, it started somewhere along the line, and I am quite good at it. Once I realized what was happening, I decided to see what I could do about replacing my self-criticism practice with a better one.

Focus First

When changing a personal practice, it is helpful to be as specific as possible on what one wants to practice differently. In my case, I chose to focus on improving my ability to return serves. Being specific helped me focus my attention and notice my results. Now every time a serve was coming, I knew I was getting another chance to practice. If I were to play a lot of volleyball, I would practice returning serves until I got the results I wanted; then I would expand my practice to include another specific skill.

This approach is far more effective than choosing a generality like “I will become a better volleyball player, starting now.” Odds are good that this declaration would end up on the unrealized wish pile with all the other good intentions.

What specific practices will you focus on that will make the greatest difference for you?

Attention Trumps Training

Since I chose to change my practice while in the middle of a game, I didn't have time to watch a DVD, read a book, hire a teacher, or take a class. Instead, I simply paid attention.

I found that through observing how others returned serves I was able to quickly learn. Before placing my attention on returning serves, I hadn't really noticed how others were doing it. Now, there were 11 other people on the court that I could learn from.

Also, by raising my own awareness of my actions through placing my attention on my returns, I quickly noticed what was working and what wasn't. When my attention was on my self-criticism, I was oblivious to all the sources of helpful information that were readily available if only I'd notice them. All in all I was surprised by how much initial improvement I gained by paying attention to my own actions, and to the actions of those around me.

What learning is already available to you, right now, if you'd only notice?

Practice Makes Improvement

The greatest shift occurred when I moved to a mindset of improvement. At the beginning of the game, I was caught in a downward negative spiral – my self-criticism was building on itself and I wasn't doing anything to help my situation.

When I made the choice to begin a practice, everything changed. I stopped seeing problems and started to see opportunities to learn. I even started to look forward to returning serves because they gave me a chance to try again. At one point, after missing a return, I heard myself say, "send me another one," which surprised even me.

Opportunities to practice improving are available in all aspects of your life – from your place of play to your place of work. All you have to do is pay attention and begin.