

## **When the Game Changes: How Athletes Can Redefine Success**

For young athletes, it can feel like there is always another level to reach: Earn playing time. Secure a starting spot. Make varsity. Get a college offer. Commit to a program. Sign an NIL deal. Move to the next level. When teammates and peers seem to be reaching those milestones, athletes can begin to wonder if they are falling behind.

[TrueSport Expert](#) Kevin Chapman, PhD, clinical and sport psychologist, and founder of Mental Lock Sport Performance Psychology, explains that athletes who feel like they are "falling behind" are often comparing themselves to peers who appear to be more developed, have more accolades, or seem better equipped to handle the demands of being a student-athlete. That comparison can make an athlete's own accomplishments feel less meaningful, especially when performance becomes closely tied to identity.

Team USA sled hockey defenseman and Paralympic gold medalist Jack Wallace experienced that feeling early in his career. During the 2015-16 season, Wallace had been the leading scorer on the U.S. Development Team and was performing at the highest level of his career. He hoped that would be enough to earn a spot on the national team. Instead, he was rostered on the Development Team for a third consecutive year.

"I thought that my best would be enough, but it wasn't," Wallace says.

For Wallace, the setback became motivation. But for young athletes, moments like this can also lead to a more difficult question: What does it mean about me if I don't reach the level I expected?

### **Remember What You Gain From Sport**

For athletes who believe that playing Division I or professionally is the only way their athletic career can be meaningful, Wallace recommends looking backward before looking too far ahead. He suggests thinking of five meaningful moments from the previous season. Those moments might include a strong performance, but they could also be time spent with teammates, traveling to compete, learning from a coach, or discovering something new about yourself.

"You hope to have more of them but are lucky to have already had as many as you've had," Wallace says.

Success in sport can look different for every athlete. Division I, Division II, Division III, NAIA, JUCO, club sports, and high school athletics can all provide opportunities to compete, grow, build relationships, and create memories.

Wallace's own definition of success has changed throughout his career. Early on, he measured it through individual performance: goals, points, hits, and other statistics. Now, he focuses more on the impact he can have beyond from his own performance. His goals include showcasing adaptive sports, introducing young athletes with disabilities to adaptive sports, and challenging

stigma around disability in sports. "That has a far greater impact on other people, as well as myself, than scoring a few goals ever did," Wallace says.

### **Keep Playing for the Right Reasons**

Having goals is important. Athletes should be allowed to dream about scholarships, national teams, professional careers, championships, and other accomplishments. But the pursuit of those goals should not come at the expense of enjoying sport.

Chapman recommends focusing on process goals, which are the specific actions and habits athletes can control. Process goals can help athletes stay focused on improvement rather than becoming consumed by outcomes.

Parents and coaches can support athletes by changing the questions they ask. Instead of always asking, "Did you win?" or "Did you make the team?" try asking:

- What did you learn?
- What are you proud of?
- What was challenging?
- What did you enjoy?
- What do you want to work on next?

These questions help athletes recognize that progress and enjoyment matter alongside results.

Wallace has never had to work particularly hard to remember why he plays. "Hockey has always been one of my favorite things to do," he says. He also makes time to step away from training and competition to protect himself from burnout. "Anytime I'm on the ice I'm having fun."

For athletes, that can be a useful reminder. You can care deeply about your performance and still enjoy the experience. You can chase the next level without deciding that the next level is what makes you valuable. Your athletic path may not look like someone else's, but that does not mean you are behind.

### **Don't Let Success, Failure, or the Next Level Define You**

Sports culture often emphasizes outcomes. Wins, rankings, statistics, roster spots, championships, scholarships, and awards are easy to measure. But focusing too heavily on those outcomes can cause athletes to overlook the process that leads to them.

"We live in a high achievement-oriented society that values outcome over process," Chapman says. "Sport culture absolutely values outcome over process, though ironically, process leads to outcome."

Athletes can have ambitious goals while still focusing on process and what they can control. Preparation, effort, learning, skill development, relationships, and responding to challenges are all part of the process.

A missed opportunity does not erase the work that came before it. An athlete can be disappointed about not making a team and still be a good athlete. An athlete can lose playing time and still be a valuable teammate. An athlete can miss out on a college offer without that outcome defining their worth. Chapman says this requires flexible thinking rather than simply trying to "think positive."

"Being disappointed in a performance can co-exist with still being a good athlete," he says.

### **Be Careful with Social Media Comparisons**

Social media can make the pressure to reach the next level even stronger. Athletes see commitment announcements, NIL deals, transfer news, highlight videos, awards, and other milestones from their peers. It can create the impression that everyone else is moving forward while they are standing still.

But athletes rarely see the full story behind those posts. "People usually tend to just post the milestones and achievements," Wallace says. "Rarely do you see the legitimate setbacks and failures."

Chapman says limiting screen time can help athletes avoid falling into the comparison trap, particularly when performance is already closely connected to identity. "Rather than measuring your progress against someone else's on social media, focus on what you are working toward and what you can control. If scrolling leaves you feeling anxious, inadequate, or behind, set limits on how often you use it."

### **Redefine What It Means to Be Tough**

Athletes often hear that they need to be tough. But Chapman says mental toughness is often misunderstood. Being tough does not mean hiding emotions or refusing to ask for help. Healthy resilience includes regulating emotions, understanding that growth involves struggle, thinking flexibly, and continuing to work through adversity. In fact, emotional suppression can make it harder for athletes to seek support because they view asking for help as a sign of weakness.

Parents and coaches can also watch for signs that an athlete's goals are becoming a source of unhealthy pressure. Chapman says negative emotional consequences can include angry outbursts, declining grades, increased disrespect, risk-taking behaviors, isolation, significant increases in screen time, and sleep disturbances.

Having high standards is not inherently unhealthy. The concern is when the pursuit of those standards begins to negatively affect other areas of an athlete's life.

### **Build an Identity Beyond Sport**

Being an athlete can be an important part of who you are, but it should not be the only part. Athletes can also be students, friends, siblings, children, mentors, artists, volunteers, fans, and people with interests that have nothing to do with competition.

Chapman says athletes need to be intentional about developing these other parts of their identities. That can mean scheduling time with friends, making time for a favorite show or movie, pursuing a hobby, or doing something simply because you enjoy it. "It is necessary to be intentional about nurturing these aspects of their identities by prioritizing time for these activities, despite a demanding sport schedule," Chapman says.

Wallace saw the value of this during his own career. While competing at an elite level, he also earned a degree in biomedical engineering. "Having to be so strict with my training schedule while earning an engineering degree taught me a lot about myself," Wallace says. "It strengthened my conviction that there should always be life outside of sports."

His degree gave him something to be proud of that had nothing to do with his performance on the ice. Building an identity outside of sport does not have to wait until an athletic career ends. Athletes can start building it now.

### **Prepare for Life Beyond Competition**

Every athlete eventually faces a transition, whether it is an injury, a team change, graduation, or the decision to retire from competition. Those moments can be especially difficult when an athlete's identity has become tied to performance. That is why the best time to build other parts of your identity is before you need them.

The skills athletes develop through sport can also provide a foundation for what comes next. Discipline, communication, teamwork, leadership, resilience, and time management can transfer to school, careers, relationships, and other areas of life. Wallace continues to rely on those skills as he trains for two sports. "Having to piece together two different training programs and training needs takes lots of planning and discipline," he says. Your sport may eventually change, but the skills and experiences you gain through it can stay with you.

### **Takeaway**

Your athletic success is not defined by how far you go or how quickly you get there. Focus on the process and the things you can control. Remember that social media shows achievements more often than setbacks. Build relationships, interests, and identities outside of sport. Allow yourself to feel disappointed without letting disappointment define you. Recognize the skills you are developing that will matter long after competition ends. Most importantly, remember why you play. You can pursue the next level without missing the value of the level you're at today.



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