

SWEATING THE SMALL STUFF

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While the trend, partly due to the best selling book, is to not “sweat the small stuff”, at Coaching Medical Excellence we take a different tack. We believe you SHOULD sweat the small stuff, or, better yet, get rid of the small stuff. Allow me to explain.

Over the course of our lives we accumulate “stuff” of all kinds: sporting goods, clothes, furniture, humans and animals. The problem is, all of this stuff needs maintenance and that maintenance takes time. Time, of course, is the one thing no one seems to have enough of (the last time I checked we all get 24 hours a day). For professional athletes, whose job entails more than 40 hours a week, these hours are at an even greater premium. Due to my dual role as both a Sports Medicine doctor and a Sport Psychologist, I am particularly concerned with how athletes spend their time. Always remembering that

TRAINING = EXERCISE + REST.

Thus, to maintain a high level of achievement on the athletic field, one simply cannot put in countless hours going to functions, talking to the press, making investment decisions, decorating a home, getting tickets for distant relatives, or just generally taking care of “stuff”. An athlete’s day, week, and indeed year, is often timed to the minute, as well it should be. Most professional athletes are only allowed to designate themselves as such for a short time. For example, an average professional hockey career lasts five years, basketball less than five years, football between three and four years, and baseball just under three years. Five years is a good athletic career, one Olympic experience is an achievement, anything more is extraordinary and not to be assumed.

As a result, the years as a professional athlete can and should be spent totally focused on making the most of this limited time. Even a short career in one of the less well remunerated sports, if guided by a smart and honest agent, will put most athletes in reasonably strong financial shape. A longer career, even by one or two years, will also put athletes in a better position for contacts and other jobs in the industry if so desired. Once the career is over, most ex-athletes are in their early thirties, leaving plenty of time for a second career or a new family. After success on the athletic field there will be ample time to do all the things and use all the “stuff” one eschewed while competing.

The things of course that are hardly “small stuff” but will use enormous amounts of energy are children and other living beings that need our love and attention. While we all know stories of athletes who were “calmed down” and “focused” by having children or pets, in my experience many athletes feel more stressed with the advent of a family. A family is a major distraction but one that simply cannot be ignored. Unfortunately, with travel schedules, training and other commitments, dedicated parents (as most athletes are

due to their determined personalities), will be more, not less stressed knowing there is a child that is missing them each day. In the medical climate of the 21st century, there is nothing wrong with putting off having children, both for male and female athletes, until they are toward the ends of their careers.

While the love given and received from children and dogs might prove difficult and counterproductive to put off until later in life, what isn't hard to avoid are the "seconds" (or thirds or fourths, etc.). By the "seconds" I mean the second anything: the second car, the second lover, the second watch, the second boat, the second snow mobile, the second motorcycle (actually, make that the first motorcycle) and most of all, the second house.

Now, I am not an investment counselor and indeed you would do well to do the opposite of my investment advice, but unless that second home is a pure investment you are planning to sell, I would proffer it will be a burden on your time and your energy. For those of you who have a house already, think about this: you now have double of the things you hate: two mortgages, two electric bills, two cable bills, another phone number, etc. Basically, this is just another thing to think about when you're watching the Weather Channel. Instead of checking the temperature to plan what to wear for your training tomorrow, you're wondering if the storm they're talking about is going to turn and hit your condo in Florida. As a professional athlete you do not need this distraction (and I don't care what a great husband, wife, brother, friend, mother, assistant, etc. that you have). The job of a professional athlete, or any professional who is competing for a job every day, is to keep the background noise to a minimum. By filling your life with such "stuff" you will sap energy that would best be used for training and the other things a professional athlete must do to maintain a high level of performance.

What about the small stuff you cannot get rid of? I suggest you *do* sweat this. Do you have a spouse and child? Spend time with them. Put them on the schedule and make that just as important as your training (especially because they are). Charity work, business meetings, and close family and friends also must be accounted for. The list pretty much ends there. What you do not need is five cars in the garage that need oil changes, the biggest house in the neighborhood that needs exterminating, closets full of shoes, garages full of sporting equipment that your company gave you. Downsize, downsize, downsize. Stuff, even stuff you don't really care about, takes energy to maintain. You don't need to spend that kind of energy in your limited years as a professional athlete. My company, *Coaching Mental Excellence*, even works with a retired teacher who has a company called "Home-Works" where she will go into your house and get you organized (usually suggesting you get a dumpster before she comes over). Get rid of the small stuff. Remember, you're a professional athlete; a little sweat for the rest of your life should be easy.

I want my patients and athlete's lives to be small and focused so they can always see it clearly and always know where they are. If you have made commitments to appear in a dozen places in two days, your brain will become cluttered. You will lose focus on training, resting and eating right. Ultimately this can put you at risk for decreased performance, or even worse, injury. If you come home to a cluttered apartment or house,

you cannot see clearly and will spend time looking for something that should be in a designated place (such as your weight belt). If you are scheduled to speak at a formal affair and you find your tuxedo has not been cleaned since the last time you wore it (indeed it's probably in a pile in the corner) you will spend too much time and energy (and money!) getting a new one. If you sweat the small (but important) stuff by having a system up front, you won't burn the energy and grief on the back end. If you put that suit in the bag that gets picked up for the dry cleaners and it is placed back in the closet where it belongs, you do not have to think about it. You do not have to sweat that small stuff because you already did- and your speech was prepared in advance and you had a great time at the party- even though you had to wear a tuxedo!!