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Soul of a Champion



Patrick Cohn

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Dr. Patrick J. Cohn, President of Peak Performance Sports of Orlando, is an author, professional speaker and a leading sports psychology expert. His mental coaching programs instill confidence, composure, and mindsets that enable athletes and teams to reach peak performance. Dr. Cohn designed the questions for the interactive quiz that was given to our Soul of a Champion athletes. USA TODAY readers can take the same quiz to see which champion has a soul that is most like theirs. Ask your questions of Dr. Cohn.

- [Soul of a Champion coverage](#)
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Comment from Patrick Cohn: Hi, Dr. Cohn here. Who would like to talk about sports psychology, mental game coaching, and the SOUL OF A CHAMPION series?

Ann Arbor MI: As far as having a competitive soul goes, do you see any difference between athletes who compete in team sports vs. those who compete in individual sports? Are they motivated by different things?

Patrick Cohn: Yes, individual athletes must be self-motivated. I work with my individual athletes in golf, tennis, and motocross for example and they are their own coach in many instances. In team sports, players are often motivated by a coach or teammates.

Fort Myers FLA: At what age, and at what level of competitiveness, is it appropriate to begin having a young athlete focus on these things, rather than viewing sports as fun?

Patrick Cohn: You want to encourage competitiveness at any age really. All great athletes are really competitive. But you should keep it fun no matter what level your child is playing. I would not ask them to be "serious" once they reach a certain level, as you want it to remain fun and have them tap into the reasons they started playing in the first place.

Burlington VT: Do you ever encounter situations where an athlete's confidence or competitiveness can be so off the charts that it becomes self-destructive?

Patrick Cohn: Yes, I do think there is such as thing as overconfidence. Overconfidence can become destructive when it prevents the athlete from practicing as much as he or she should. And it may rub other athletes the wrong way.

Bismark, ND: Tiger Woods has shown that when one-on-one with an opponent, he can flat-out dominate. But when in a team setting, he seems less interested and ultimately, less effective on the course. Do you have any opinions on why this might be? Or is it simply coincidence that his performance falters in those instances?

Patrick Cohn: This could be that he either feels pressure to perform for his teammates, which he does not deal with often, or he is less motivated to perform his best in that setting. I think that his intensity may suffer in this setting because of the atmosphere surrounding the event and knowing he has teammates to depend on. When his intensity is lower - so will be his focus.

st George Utah: I first experienced being in a zone racing motocross as an expert, I quickly realized how important it was to me and my speed on the track,

my question is how do you train yourself to drop into the zone when you want/need to, for me it was yelling at myself to concentrate, concentrate, concentrate, during competition, my kids now are competing at swimming and i would like to be able to help them achieve this magical level of performance in their sports, thank you, Peter Dill

Patrick Cohn: You can't force yourself into the zone... You can set the conditions to enter the zone more often by making sure you are focused on the right areas, confident, and in control. If you have to tell yourself to concentrate over and over again, something is missing here. You should be able to focus without forcing yourself to focus. My suggestions would be to help them focus on the right performance cues and be able to refocus when distracted.

Washington, DC: What other walks of life do you see these psychological qualities being most significant? Business? Politics?

Patrick Cohn: Mental skills for excellence relate to any performance situation. It does not matter if you are a business person, musician, athlete, or surgeon - the same qualities apply to performance. You must be confident, focused on the right cues, and have composure to deal with adversity if you want to excel.

Detroit MI: Are there some situations where an athlete can get by on just extraordinary talent, or are these psychological factors always necessary to excel at the highest level?

Patrick Cohn: Yes, talent will take an athlete very far, but only up to a certain level of competition. You can get by in HS for example and maybe some college teams, but not at the pro level or elite level. The top athletes in the world have both talent and the mental game to succeed at the top level. Also, match up two athletes with the same physical skills, but one has a better mental game, which one do you think would win?

Cincinnati Ohio: What about dealing with failure? In most sports there's only one champion. What's the approach to dealing with athletes who can't quite reach the peak of their field, perhaps through no fault of their own, but more because they are just up against stiff competition?

Patrick Cohn: This is very important for any athlete today - you will fail more times that you succeed. Look at the great hitters in baseball - they are successful only 30% of the time - they also have to deal with 70% failure rate. I talk with my students about learning from failure and growing from mistakes. You have to take a learning approach to mistakes and failure so you can improve. Some athletes just beat themselves up after a defeat and this does not help anyone...including your family when you go home! It hurts confidence too.

Portland, MA: Are there certain exercises or techniques you teach clients to improve self-confidence? Or is it more on a case-by-case basis?

Patrick Cohn: Yes, there is a method to my madness :). I use several strategies to help athletes improve self-confidence such as helping them learn and grow from failure or reframing doubts. But it certainly helps to have some past success under your belt - as this is a huge source of confidence. Go to my website (<http://www.peaksports.com>) and check out "The Confident Athlete" in my proshop!

seattle wa : i want to transfer the sports success psychology to life and work in general as well as sports the question is if you dont have the traits that make you a champion can you learn them or are some people just born into them

Patrick Cohn: Yes, you can develop and learn them - that is my life's work - teach others these qualities. Now, I will say that some coaches and parents will unknowingly sabotage these champion qualities by instilling perfectionism, which holds back confidence, for example.

South Grand Prairie Texas: Given your perspective, which three athletes do you most admire for their mental toughness?

Patrick Cohn: Tiger Woods, Roger Federer, and Martina Navratilova.

Fort Wayne, IN: My wife and I were having a discussion about starting our three-year-old son in some soccer classes. He really enjoys kicking the ball and just having a good time right now. I am worried it is too early to put a structure into his play time and pressure him to perform. Any thoughts?

Patrick Cohn: I think you can, but make it for fun and games - not pressure. He can learn the skills with other kids his age, make friends, and get fit, which are all positive. You don't have to pressure him to be the best. He can just master the skills and play games at this age.

Norfolk, Va 23504: My name is Darren Sanderlin, Head Varsity Basketball Coach at Booker T. Washington High School in Norfolk, Va. My basketball team won the Va. High School AAA Basketball title this past season 2006. With this years team returning to defend OUR title what direction do you suggest I take them so that they believe that they can achieve our goal of repeating? Keep in mind that most of this years team saw little or no time last season. They have talent, lacks a little in self -confidence, and chemistry/cohesiveness is somewhat being affected right now because they seem to be wondering who will be the star/stars/starters. Your insight will be very helpful. Thanks a million, and I am a serious Mayweather fan!!!! Pound for pound!!!!!!!!!!!!

Patrick Cohn: Hi Darren - You have your work cut out for you. Just kidding. I think you want to play up the idea that they know how to win being on the team last year. My suggestions is to not set the expectations that they need to win every game or the championship. Set your goals high, but then focus on one game at a time, one point at a time. That is my philosophy.

Guilford, CT: My son plays AAA youth hockey. I stumbled upon the Soul of a Champion show while channel surfing after returning from a tournament where his team got 'spanked' by some of the competition. Although there were some exceptionally talented players on the opposition, there was also the issue of our kids not quite playing up to their own potential, losing concentration, abandoning the game plan, etcetera. I remember the comment of one assistant coach that "I can draw Xes and Os on the board, but if they don't have it here (hand over heart) there is not much I can do. After viewing the show, I visited the USA today site, as well as your site, and most of what I saw made a lot of sense. My question is: how can I convince a group of "old school", type-A-male former players (the coaches), that there is, in fact , something that they (and we parents) can do to facilitate our kids being both happier and better performers on the mental level?

Patrick Cohn: Wow, great observations. I think you can give examples of how top athletes today use mental toughness to their advantage. I read an interview with Roger Federer ... and he said that early in his career he got "spanked" because he was not mentally tough or fit enough. He also said that he had to work on the mental game component to get to the top of the tennis world. I think you can find a lot of these examples in sports.

Thomasville, N.C.: What folks in other professions would you compare the world's elite athletes to in terms of physical genius?

Patrick Cohn: Look at any of the top business leaders, such as Donald Trump, and you will note that they have all the qualities of Soul of the Champion, such as competitiveness, desire, confidence, and ability to thrive under pressure.

Comment from Patrick Cohn: Thanks everyone for the great questions. I hope this was helpful for you. Please watch the Soul of a Champion show for more great insights and also visit my website (www.peaksports.com) if you want to learn about sports psychology and mental toughness.

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