

Strider Smarts presented by Coach Bob

The Power of Negative Thinking

No, this is not a misprint of Norman Vincent Peale's, The Power of Positive Thinking. It's another plagiarism job by me from the book of former Indiana Hoosier Basketball coach, Bobby Knight.

Knight says he wants people to get rid of their rose-colored glasses and start working for what they want, rather than just hoping, so he isn't kidding about the value of negative thinking. He defines it as "recognizing, addressing, and removing obstacles to winning." For Mr. Knight that includes preparation and the elimination of mistakes. "Having the will to win is not enough," he writes. "Everyone has that. What matters is having the will to prepare to win." Victory, he insists, "favors the team making the fewest mistakes."



Bob Dozoretz

In my words, prepare for the worst case scenario. Mr. Knight lists "always worry" as the third of his Ten Commandments of leadership. "If you can't think of a thing to be worried about, worry about being overconfident," he says. Great advice.

Mr. Knight has put together an historical roster of those he believes succeeded through negative thinking. It includes Washington, Lincoln, Eisenhower, Shakespeare, Sun Tzu, Stonewall Jackson and Leonardo da Vinci. On his list of overconfident failures are Thomas Dewey, Robert E. Lee, Napoleon and Hitler. "Hitler must not have read Tolstoy," Mr. Knight says, or he wouldn't have invaded Russia.

Roughly half of "The Power of Negative Thinking" is simply about basketball. That Mr. Knight focuses on his three NCAA champs and the gold-medal Olympics team is understandable, but his coaching quirks are more interesting. He doesn't like to call timeouts, preferring to let his teams play through tough situations. Even in the waning seconds of a game, his advice is: "Do not stop the clock and let opponents set up their defense." There are no timeouts in races, so we need to adjust on the fly, just as he suggests.

Knight, now 72, was also quick to praise players when they did well. "Now I may surprise you with this thought," he writes. "Amid all those firm negatives that bring things into line, a coach should never overlook a chance to be positive." He did win over 900 games, so apparently he knew the correct balance.

The running connection should be obvious. Ask what can go wrong on race day and how can you prepare for it. What is your plan 'B' or even 'C'? What did you do in training to overcome these obstacles? For example, I always tell my runners that if it is raining hard, to go for a run, as it may be pouring race day. Race directors always have alternate plans as do elite runners, so you should too.

Thanks Mr. Knight for showing us the dark side to optimal performance.

I Am A Runner
Coach Bob
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