

APPLYING COMPONENTS OF ACHIEVEMENT GOAL THEORY FOR STRENGTH AND CONDITIONING COACHES

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Achievement Goal Theory (AGT) has grown in size, scope, and applicability across the sporting landscape as a viable explanation for athlete behaviors (1). While many of the intricacies of the theory fall well beyond the scope of this article, the foundation of the theory is that individuals behave in an intentional and rational manner and are goal-directed in those behaviors (1). Unfortunately, this might cause a problem in that a coach may not inherently see the athlete's behavior as rational. In addition, different athletes on the same team may have different goals from each other and the sport or strength and conditioning coaching staff.

MAJOR COMPONENTS WITHIN AGT

As AGT has received more attention in the literature, the theory has become partitioned and exponentially more complex. The complexity has developed by combining of pieces and not necessarily from the individual component pieces.

The first major component involves Dweck's work on growth mindset, which has exploded in recent years within the education and sport settings (2). This work clearly falls beneath the umbrella of AGT and, while "growth mindset" has become a popularized term of late, Dweck has spent the last 30 years building a research base for her conclusions (3). According to Dweck, individuals have implicit beliefs about whether talent and intelligence are fixed (i.e., capacity, innate) or whether they are malleable (i.e., earned, learned) (2,3). Specific to coaching, consider a hypothetical athlete that adopts a fixed mindset about his or her strength. How hard is that athlete going to train if he or she inherently believes she is already as strong as she will be? A parallel in education, both at high school and collegiate levels, is when students report, "I'm just not good at math." In both cases, the individual puts forth reduced effort and the innate belief of not being able to get stronger or better at math is confirmed. This is obviously a problem, and the longer those beliefs go unchallenged, the more evidence the athlete has that their original belief was correct.

The second major component within AGT that has received substantial research attention is the dichotomy between task- and ego-oriented athletes (4). In brief, task-oriented athletes adopt self-referenced attitudes, give consistently high effort, and are willing to make mistakes for the sake of long-term development. Ego-oriented athletes are concerned with how they compare to others, their effort and intensity fluctuate wildly, and they adopt a today-is-most-important mentality over anything long-term. Perhaps the single biggest distinction to note is the long-term impact of an athlete being self-referenced or other focused. The self-referenced (i.e., task) athlete simply tries to get better each day, and as long as he or she feels progress toward something (e.g., learning a new lift, getting stronger or faster, or improving technique), the day can be viewed as a success. The other-referenced athlete essentially looks around the room or team, or considers opponents, and makes a judgement about their comparative ability in the moment, and only those instances

where he or she compares favorably are judged as a success. Given those examples, it is no wonder why task-oriented athletes have been shown to yield the most positively valenced variables over a season or career (4).

The third major component of AGT has received comparably less attention (4). Nonetheless, this component is perhaps more important to the strength and conditioning professional compared to others. Athletes tend to adopt either an approach or avoidance disposition toward challenges. Approach-minded athletes are readily willing to learn new lifts or variations of old lifts while attacking the challenge with effort and energy. Avoidance-minded athletes will be pessimistic, grumble about the task, delay when possible, and generally dodge the task at hand.

COMBINATIONS LEAD TO COMPLEXITY

None of the major AGT dichotomous components occur in a vacuum. Instead, they are occurring simultaneously within every athlete and coach. One of the current trends in AGT-themed research is to combine these components to get a more complete picture of athlete behaviors (5,6). There has also been substantial debate regarding how stable those beliefs are, and the general consensus is that each component is malleable, which is an aspect that is critical for coaches to understand (4). Additionally, each coach has personal beliefs for each major component that directly impacts the coach's behaviors.

At the coach-to-athlete level, different coaching terms are thought to promote either a mastery-focused climate or a performance-focused climate. The impact coaches have on athletes across those two coaching climates have been well documented across both the individual and team levels of analysis (4). In nearly all cases, the positively valenced variables increase for athletes coached in a mastery-focused climate including intrinsic motivation, enjoyment, satisfaction, effort, persistence, self-confidence, team cohesion, and collective efficacy. Going beyond the positive increases, there are negatively valenced variables that increase with performance-focused climates including anxiety, worry, tension, pressure to perform, maladaptive coping strategies, reliance on other-focused goals, poor sportsmanship, and amoral behavior.

For each of the three major components (e.g., beliefs about ability, task or ego orientation, approach or avoid mentality), we could place an athlete somewhere on a continuum between the two extremes (i.e., all task-oriented versus all ego-oriented). You, the coach, have your own individual beliefs along the same major component continuums, which influences how you coach a group of athletes or run your facility. That is stacked layers of complexity and as a strength and conditioning coach, the challenge is even more extreme because at different points in each day you have entirely different rosters of teams coming into your facility with each one coming from, or going to, the coaching climate established by the sport coaches which may or may not be consistent with your own coaching climate.

PUTTING THIS KNOWLEDGE TO WORK

There really is no debate about whether a mastery- or performance-focused climate is better for athletes. If you are finding yourself unsure of the type of climate you want to foster, then pause and reflect on your own beliefs and values regarding competition and achievement. There is nothing in AGT research that says mastery-focused coaches do not coach with passion, yell, or challenge their athletes to reach new heights. Much of this will simply come down to fundamental world view questions. Do you believe mistakes are acceptable, normal, natural, and can be fixed? If you answered “yes,” then you believe in a mastery focus. Do you believe that consistent effort over time will yield the best results? If you answered “no,” then you believe in a performance focus. Helping athletes establish more productive achievement belief patterns can be a challenge for coaches, and many coaches need some help figuring out how they can be better at it. A first step is to consider what you say to the athletes. Here are a couple common examples of coaching comments followed by the problem with the statement and options for how to approach the athletes.

1. “Look at Jenny! She can do it, why can’t you?” A coach screaming this statement in frustration just told the athlete to focus on someone else’s performance and did not provide any instruction or help for the struggling athlete. What is it that Jenny is doing so well? The coach’s question of “Why can’t you?” also changes the athlete’s focus to make note of a deficiency without any way to fix or improve it. Conversely, a mastery-focused coach will focus on something controllable by the athlete and provide a specific technique cue that needs to be improved.
2. “Big game this week, give it some extra effort in training.” This sets up the pattern of fluctuating effort levels based on entirely uncontrollable aspects unrelated to the actual training. Coaches try to get more effort out of their athletes all the time (e.g., the week before test-out week, the last microcycle of the season, before a big match). If increased effort for a short duration worked so well, the national obesity rate would plummet every January when all the new gym attendees stick to their New Year’s resolutions for two weeks. Consistent effort applied to a sound training program over time will yield the best results. This does not mean coaches should avoid increasing the intensity level of training for their athletes. But increasing that intensity level could be done through more challenging goals, modifying the exercises, or adding in some twists to the normal routine (7). So, in the example statement, the problem is less about giving more effort and more about why that increased effort is needed. That may sound like a trivial detail, but those sorts of changes are exactly what determine the difference between a mastery and performance climate and why coaches should be aware of how their communication affects athletes.

3. “Head sport coach told me that if you cannot lift ‘x’ amount, you will not play.” This example can also apply to running or agility scores. First, strength and conditioning coaches should not get into the middle of playing time issues between the athletes and sport coaches. If you have a rule and can enforce that rule, then own it; do not throw the blame elsewhere. Second, placing all the emphasis on the outcome of a lift, run, or test encourages athletes to cut corners and otherwise devalue the process and technique. Safe training is a principle supported by leading strength and conditioning coaches, and anything that negatively impacts safety is ill-advised (8). Finally, statements like this only target a sub-sample of the athletes and the interplay between self-confidence, the objective you just gave the athletes, and their own ability levels can be problematic (7,9). It is most likely that some of the athletes can already achieve “x” and some are nowhere close to “x,” leaving only a relatively small subset of the athletes that have a reasonable chance of achieving “x” at the prescribed time. Changing the statement to be something self-referenced immediately speaks to all the athletes, as every one of them should be trying to improve their own marks.

In each of the above examples, it is fair to assume the coach had positive intentions; namely, to motivate athletes to achieve more. Motivation is the essence of coaching, which presents the obvious challenge of how best to go about motivating athletes to improve performance levels. Becoming a better coach will allow you to help more athletes improve their potential. If you believe you are as good a coach as you can be, check your own beliefs relative to a fixed or growth mindset. If you believe measuring your own success should be determined by the performance of other coaches, it might be time to consider your own task-ego balance. If reaching out to someone to help you learn more about coaching with a better mastery focus seems too hard, consider whether you are approach or avoidance inclined.

CONCLUSION

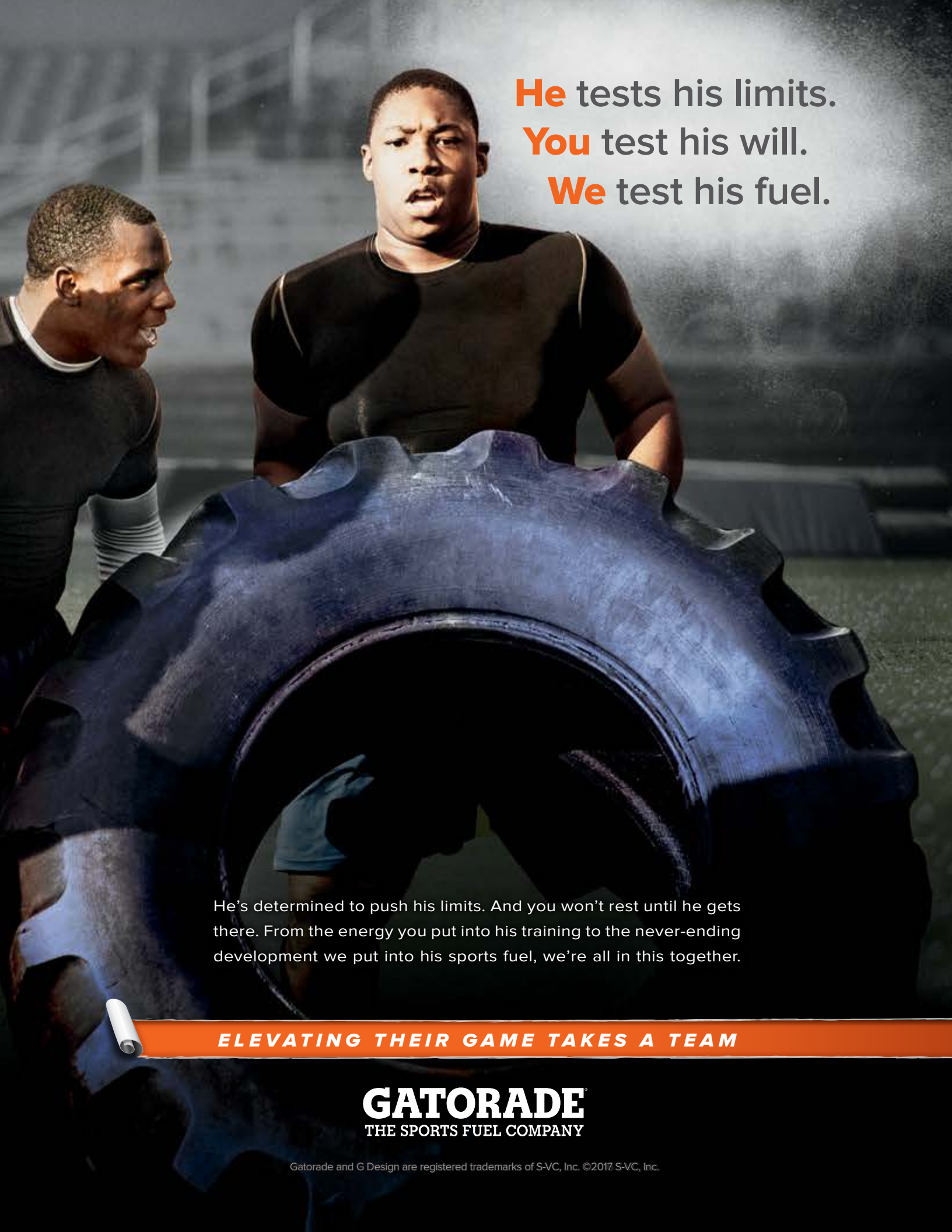
In sports settings, a vast majority of athletes you coach will not become professional, but these major components of AGT carry-over outside of sport into any achievement-based setting. So, the athlete that adopts a fixed mindset as a high school basketball player is likely to have a fixed mindset about work tasks as an adult 20 years later. The football player only concerned with how he compares to his teammates is likely to view his coworkers in the same fashion two decades later. It can be argued that coaches helping athletes adopt a more productive set of achievement orientations is the single greatest contribution that coaches can make to the athletes’ lives.

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A full-page advertisement featuring two male athletes in a stadium setting. The athlete in the center is pushing a large, dark blue gear. The athlete on the left is looking at him with a determined expression. The background is a blurred stadium with bright lights.

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