

The One Quality Great Teammates Have in Common

by [John O'Sullivan](#) / Tuesday, 13 October 2015

“Coach, can I talk to you?”

“Sure,” I said. “What’s on your mind today Michael?”

“Well, I just want to know what I can do so I get to start more games and get more playing time as a center midfielder. I don’t think I am showing my best as a winger, and my parents tell me I am not going to get noticed by the college scouts unless something changes.”

Well Michael,” I said, “there is something that all coaches are looking for from the players they recruit. In fact, it is exactly what I am looking for from you as well. If you approach every practice, every fitness session, and every match with this one thing, I think you will see a huge improvement in your play, regardless of where you play. Interested?”

“Of course, coach. What is it?”

I waited a moment before I answered to make sure he was listening. **“You have to stop asking what you can get, and start asking what you can give. You must serve.”**

Michael furrowed his brow as he tried to process what I told him. “You want me to serve the team, like with food?”

I smiled, “No Michael, serving others is the one thing that unites successful people, from friends to employees to athletes to business owners. The great ones know that to be more they must become more, and to become more they must serve others.”

“So, you are saying that instead of asking what I can get from the team, I should be asking what I can give to the team?”

I wanted to leap out of my chair and hug him.

Michael got it. It’s not about him. It’s not about me. It’s about service. The tool that would eventually earn him more playing time and increase his chances of playing in college serving others by focusing upon what he could give, instead of what he could get.

My great friend and coaching mentor Dr. Jerry Lynch is the founder of Way of Champions is the winner of 34 NCAA titles and one NBA World Championship as a sport psychologist and consultant. He calls this paradigm-shifting question the most effective question an athlete can ask, and an attitude that every coach must try and instill in his or her team.

We live in a world these days where self-centeredness and a ‘what’s in it for me’ attitude of entitlement is far too prevalent. **In the age of the selfie, Instagram, Facebook and a million other ways to say “look at me,” the concept of teamwork and the importance of service to others has gotten lost in the shuffle.**

This is very sad, because service to others is the exact thing that athletes need to not only become elite performers, but the type of athlete that coaches look for, celebrate, and fight over at the next level. Do you want to stand out from the crowd? Start by serving everyone in that crowd.

Far too many athletes bring the attitude of “what do I get” to practice and games. They want to know how they can:

- Get to start
- Get more playing time
- Get to play my favorite position
- Get to score all the points/goals
- Get to work hard when I want to
- Get to show up (physically and mentally) when I feel like it
- Get attention as the star player

Sadly, this is the path to short-term satisfaction, at the expense of long-term development and high-level performance. This attitude does not promote success; it inhibits growth on and off the field, the court, and the ice.

If you want your athletes to perform at their very best, whether you are a parent or coach, then you must get them the right question. *What can I give?*

Athletes who ask themselves what they can give bring “I can give/I can do” attitudes and actions to the table for their teams. They can actually “get” everything they are looking for simply by starting with the following service oriented ideas:

- I can give my best effort in practice and games
- I can give my team a positive attitude no matter what the circumstances
- I can give my team a boost no matter how many minutes I play
- I can give my team a better chance to win no matter what position I play
- I can do the dirty work so my teammate can score the goal and get the glory
- I can sacrifice my personal ambitions for the better of the group
- I can lead by example
- I can be an example of our core values in action

As a coach, I used to think that the most important thing was to have my best players be my hardest workers. But now I realize that isn't enough. Being a hard worker can still be a selfish pursuit.

No, the most important thing as a coach is to have a team that all ask “what can I give,” especially when it come to your captains, your upperclassmen, and your most talented athletes. You must teach them that the selfish attitude may once in a while lead to success, but **the selfless attitude leads to excellence, celebrates the success of others, and makes you the type of athlete that EVERY COACH wants on his or her team.**

The most successful sports team in the professional era is not the NY Yankees, or the Boston Celtics, or Real Madrid, but a team from a far less known sport. It is the New Zealand All Blacks in rugby, who have an astonishing 86% winning percentage and numerous championships to their name. In the outstanding book about the All Blacks called *Legacy*, author James Kerr discusses one of their core values that epitomizes the selfless attitude. It's called “Sweep the Shed.”

You see the goal of every All Blacks player is to leave the national team shirt in a better place than when he got it. His goal is to contribute to the legacy by doing his part to grow the game and keep the team progressing every single day.

In order to do so, the players realize that you must remain humble, and that no one is too big or too famous to do the little things required each and every day to get better. You must eat right. You must sleep well. You must take care of yourself on and off the field. You must train hard. You must sacrifice your own goals for the greater good and a higher purpose.

You must sweep the shed.

After each match, played in front of 60,000 plus fans, in front of millions on TV, after the camera crews have left, and the coaches are done speaking, when the eyes of the world have turned elsewhere, there is still a locker room to be cleaned. By the players!

That's right, after each and every game the All Blacks leading players take turns sweeping the locker room of every last piece of grass, tape, and mud. [In the words of Kerr:](#) **“Sweeping the sheds. Doing it properly. So no one else has to. Because no one looks after the All Blacks. The All Blacks look after themselves.”**

They leave the locker room in a better place than they got it. They leave the shirt in a better place than they got it. They are not there to get. They are there to give.

If you are a coach, recognize that by intentionally creating a culture where players seek to give instead if get, you will have a team that not only develops excellence on and off the field but is a team that is much more enjoyable to coach. Create a culture that rewards the 95% who are willing to give, and weeds out the 5% who are trying to get. When you do, the “getters” will stick out like a player who is vomiting: he feels better and everyone else feels sick. Eventually, he will get on board, or be thrown off the ship.

Parents, teach your children to be teammates who give. It will not only serve them well in athletics; it will serve them well in life.

For as former NY Yankee great Don Mattingly so eloquently stated:

“Then at one point in my career, something wonderful happened. I don't know why or how . . . but I came to understand what “team” meant. It meant that although I didn't get a hit or make a great defensive play, I could impact the team in an incredible and consistent way. I learned I could impact the team in an incredible and consistent way. I learned I could impact my team by caring first and foremost about the team's success and not my own. I don't mean by rooting for us like a typical fan. Fans are fickle. I mean CARE, really care about the team . . . about “US.”

Mattingly continued: “I became less selfish, less lazy, less sensitive to negative comments. When I gave up me, I became more. I became a captain, a leader, a better person and I came to understand that life is a team game. And you know what? I've found most people aren't team players. They don't realize that life is the only game in town. Someone should tell them. It has made all the difference in the world to me.”

Please share this article with an athlete or a team that matters to you. Encourage, no implore them to take Don Mattingly's advice, to take the All Blacks advice. Come to prepared to compete, and to be a “giver” and not a “getter.”

You will stand out. You will be a difference maker. And you will get everything you want by giving full of yourself, and helping everyone else get what they want. It changes everything.