

The Kebab Model: Integrating Process and Outcome in Athletic Mental Training

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ABSTRACT

Sport psychology has created a false dichotomy between process-focused and outcome-focused approaches to mental training. This opinion piece argues for an integrated model using the metaphor of the Persian kebab, where outcome and process are interconnected elements of a unified whole. Drawing from practical coaching experience and flow theory, the Kebab Model proposes that optimal performance occurs when athletes maintain clear outcome vision while simultaneously engaging in process excellence—much like the distinct but inseparable components of a perfectly prepared kebab.

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Introduction

"Focus on the process, not the outcome."

This has become a mantra in modern sport psychology, repeated in coaching clinics and psychology journals with almost religious fervor. As the author of *Heads-Up Baseball* and *Heads-Up Baseball 2.0*, where we emphasize having a process for playing one pitch at a time, I have certainly contributed my share to this idea. However, practical experience has taught me that this well-intentioned advice, when taken to its extreme, creates its own problems.

The field has swung from outcome obsession to process obsession, missing the fundamental truth that both elements are essential components of peak performance. Like the carefully balanced ingredients in a Persian kebab, outcome vision and process execution must work together as an integrated whole.

The Problem with Process-Only Thinking

Shortly after completing my PhD, I served as a head college baseball coach and fully embraced the process-focused approach. My players each had their pre-pitch routines and executed them meticulously. Unfortunately, we lost many games. I found myself rewarding players for completing their routines while the scoreboard behind me displayed another embarrassing loss. My players eventually began to wonder if I cared about winning at all.

This experience revealed a critical flaw in pure process thinking: when athletes disconnect from meaningful outcomes, they lose the vital energy needed to actually win. Process without purpose becomes empty ritual. The routines were executed perfectly, but they lacked the animating force that comes from clear, compelling targets.

Meanwhile, the broader athletic culture focuses primarily on outcomes. Fans want victories, players want wins, parents want their children to succeed. When coaches emphasize only process while everyone else cares about results, we create a disconnect between our training philosophy and the athlete's lived reality.

The Problem with Outcome-Only Thinking

However, swinging entirely toward outcome focus creates equally serious problems. When athletes focus exclusively on winning, they tend to tense up, lose their focus, and underperform. The pressure of outcome attachment interferes with the fluid execution that characterizes peak performance.

Research in flow theory supports this observation. Athletes in flow states report being simultaneously focused on clear goals while completely absorbed in the present moment. They don't abandon outcome awareness—they integrate it with process engagement in a way that enhances rather than hinders performance.

The Kebab Model: Integration, Not Opposition

The solution lies not in choosing sides but in recognizing that outcome and process are one thing: a kebab.

In Persian cuisine, the kebab represents the art of integration. Each component—the tender meat, the flavorful vegetables, the aromatic spices—maintains its distinct character while contributing to a unified culinary experience. The meat provides substance, the vegetables add balance and nutrition, the spices create depth of flavor. Remove any element and you no longer have a true kebab.

Athletic performance requires both outcome and process operating as one. The outcome is the meat and vegetables, the substance an athlete ultimately wants to taste. The process

is the skewer that holds it all together so it can be cooked, handled, and delivered. Take away the skewer and the meal falls apart. Remove the meat and vegetables and there is nothing left to satisfy. One without the other leaves the athlete hungry.

Theoretical Foundation

Flow theory provides scientific support for this integrated approach. Csikszentmihalyi identified "clear goals" as one of the fundamental characteristics of flow states. Notably, he didn't suggest that athletes should ignore outcomes, but rather that they should have clear targets while remaining fully engaged in the present moment.

When athletes achieve this integration, they experience what we might call "kebab consciousness"—a state where outcome clarity energizes process execution rather than creating anxiety. They know exactly what they're trying to achieve (the clear goal component of flow) while remaining completely absorbed in the actions required to achieve it.

Practical Applications

In my current coaching practice, I help athletes achieve this integration by:

1. **Establishing Outcome Clarity:** Athletes must first gain crystal-clear vision of what they want to achieve—not just in the immediate competition, but in their broader athletic journey.
2. **Connecting Process to Outcome:** Rather than treating routines as disconnected rituals, we explicitly connect each process element to outcome achievement. The pre-shot routine isn't just something to do—it's the vehicle for creating the optimal state for success.

3. **Individual Calibration:** The balance between outcome awareness and process focus must be calibrated to each athlete. Some performers need more outcome energy to activate their best effort; others need more process focus to manage their anxiety. Like master chefs adjusting spice levels, coaches must find each athlete's optimal ratio.
4. **Dynamic Integration:** Rather than static balance, athletes learn to dynamically adjust their focus as situations change. High-pressure moments might require more process focus, while low-energy situations might need increased outcome awareness.

Cultural Resonance in Persian Sport Psychology

The kebab metaphor carries particular resonance in Persian culture, where the art of cooking represents harmony between individual elements and collective purpose. Persian culinary tradition emphasizes neither the dominance of a single ingredient nor the bland uniformity of all elements, but rather the skillful combination that creates new possibilities.

This philosophy extends naturally to athletic development. Just as a master chef understands that the best kebab emerges from the interplay of quality ingredients, preparation techniques, and cooking mastery, the most effective mental training emerges from the integration of clear outcomes, excellent processes, and skilled application. Persian poetry and philosophy have long celebrated this principle of unity in multiplicity. Rumi wrote about the necessity of apparent opposites working together to

create beauty and truth. In the same way, outcome focus and process excellence—often presented as opposites in Western sport psychology—can work together to create optimal performance.

Implications for Practice

The Kebab Model suggests several shifts in how we approach mental training:

For Coaches: Rather than choosing between process and outcome emphasis, develop the skill to help athletes integrate both. Like master chefs, learn to adjust the balance based on individual needs and situational demands.

For Athletes: Practice holding both outcome vision and process focus simultaneously. Your desired results should energize your execution, not create anxiety about it.

For Sport Psychology: Move beyond the false dichotomy that has limited our field. Research should examine how different ratios of outcome awareness and process focus affect performance in various populations and contexts.

Conclusion

It is not all about the process, but it is not all about the outcome either. It is about the kebab—the integrated whole where clear targets and excellent execution combine to create something neither could achieve alone. The outcome gives rise to the process by providing direction and energy. The process serves the outcome by creating the pathway for achievement. Together, they form a unified system that honors both the athlete's ambitions and the practical requirements of excellence.

When athletes learn to live in this integration—maintaining clear vision while executing with presence—they discover the vital energy that comes from purpose-driven action. They experience what flow researchers have long observed: peak performance emerges not from choosing

between goals and process, but from masterfully combining both.

Like the perfectly balanced kebab that satisfies both hunger and pleasure, the integrated approach satisfies both the athlete's need for meaningful targets and their requirement for present-moment excellence. This is not compromise—it is synthesis. This is not settling for less—it is achieving more. In a field that has spent too much time debating ingredients, perhaps it is time to focus on cooking.

Dr. Tom Hanson is the author of "Heads-Up Baseball" and "Heads-Up Baseball 2.0" and founder of the Play Big Mental Performance Coaching System. His work integrates practical coaching experience with evidence-based mental training approaches. DrTomHanson.com

Dr. Tom Hanson is a leading authority in applied sport psychology with more than three decades of experience coaching elite performers. He earned his Ph.D. from the University of Virginia, completed his M.S. at the University of Illinois in 1987, and graduated from Luther College in 1985.

He has worked extensively in Major League Baseball, most prominently as Head Mental Performance Coach for the New York Yankees, and has served in roles with the Texas Rangers, Minnesota Twins, and Los Angeles Angels. His work centers on helping athletes compete freely under pressure, aligning identity, emotion, and execution to produce repeatable high-level performance.

Hanson is co-author of *Heads-Up Baseball* and *Heads-Up Baseball 2.0*, foundational texts in the mental-performance field now used widely by coaches, professional players, and sport-psych practitioners. He also wrote *Play Big: Mental Toughness Secrets that Take Baseball Players to the Next Level* and *Who Will Do What by When?*, a leadership book

on commitment, accountability, and follow-through.

Outside of sport, he has consulted for organizations such as Microsoft, Verizon, and Pepperidge Farm, bringing the same performance principles to business leaders and teams. His current work advances practical mental-training methodology and continues bridging theory with real-world performance, most recently through frameworks such as the Kebab Model, which reframes the relationship between outcome focus and process execution.