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## **Mental Toughness: End That Losing Streak!**

Grand Rapids, Mich. – Our Detroit Lions are now 0-11. Losing feels terrible. You practice hard, and play hard, and sometimes you still lose. When you lose a few in a row, anger and frustration builds. You may try “harder” to win, yet the losing continues.

Dr. Eddie O'Connor, **Grand Rapids Sport Psychologist**, identifies the **9 most common reactions** he sees to losing and **how to avoid them** so you can win your next contest:

1. Focus on the losses. Our minds are designed to focus on threats to protect us. Losing and mistakes are threats to coaches and athletes, so your mind has a natural tendency to focus on them. That type of focus hurts performance and perpetuates the losing streak by keeping your attention on the past – which is now over and you can no longer do anything about it. Get you mind into the current game or preparing for your next opponent. **It is the only thing you can control.**
2. Focus on winning. Your desire to win is going to flare-up during a losing streak. But the reality is you have no control over the outcome of the game. The more you focus on winning, the less likely it is that you actually will win because you are distracted by the outcome. **Refocus your attention to the process of the game.** Focus on what you can control each moment of the match. Winning will then take care of itself.
3. Get more emotional and/or angry for “motivation”. This can work, but **only if you use that emotion to focus your attention on the task at hand.** Some athletes respond to anger with a laser-like focus on the present moment and what needs to be done. Others get distracted by the intensity of emotion and don't pay attention to the critical information available on the field necessary for their best performance.
4. Change your approach to the game because you lost. You have to be careful with this one. Sometimes you lose because the other team is simply better that day or you don't have the talent to win that particular contest. In this situation, the outcome of the game may have nothing to do with your approach to it. You wouldn't want to abandon a solid game plan or pre-game preparation routine unless the preparation plan itself is flawed. **Carefully look at the reasons for your losses and address those specifically.** Don't change for the sake of change, especially if your approach follows the principles I list here.
5. Do more. Another dangerous one, especially in team sports. If you try to do someone else's job or pick up their responsibilities on the field you won't be doing your job as well as you could be. Breakdowns in execution will then occur. **Identify what your job is and do that to the best of your ability.**
6. Point the finger at your teammates. It is easier to see where others have messed up. Focusing on our teammates' mistakes takes the pressure off of us and protects our egos. It also brings down our teammates' confidence, ruins team chemistry, and contributes to the losing. When things go bad, **step-up and be accountable.** Take

responsibility for your role in the loss and work hard to correct it. This can inspire your teammates to do the same and unite the team toward a common goal of excellence in both practice and competition.

7. Focus on mistakes. Our mind has a natural tendency to dwell on mistakes, often to help us avoid doing them again. Unfortunately, focusing on what you *don't* want to do increases the likelihood that you'll do it again because that's where your attention is. Instead, **direct your attention to proper execution of skills and game plan**.
8. Beat yourself up. We feel bad when we lose, maybe even guilty for mistakes we've made. Somehow, beating ourselves up is an expression of how much we care. It is also unproductive, hurts performance and brings team morale down. As a mentally tough athlete, **redirect your focus to what you are doing well**. Maximize your strengths in every practice and competition. This will build positive momentum.
9. Give up. Losing is a motivation killer. A losing mind-set will have athletes think, "Why should I try? We can't win no matter what I do." And so effort is lost. As a committed, mentally tough athlete play to your own high standard of excellence regardless of the outcome or opponent. **When you give full attention and effort at all times you maximize your chances of winning**.

In short, if you want to end the losing streak you have to commit to a mentally tough mindset. Give full effort consistently, focus on the here and now, and maximize your strengths. Be responsible for your own performance and hold yourself to a high standard of personal excellence.

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**More about Eddie O'Connor, Ph.D.**

*Dr. O'Connor is a **Grand Rapids Sport Psychologist** who helps athletes and teams develop the psychological edge that enables them to be better and more consistent than their opponents in remaining determined, confident, focused and in control under pressure.*

*Dr. O'Connor is a Certified Sport Psychology Consultant, Association for Applied Sport Psychology & listed in the US Olympic Committee Sport Psychology Registry.*

*He is available for interviews by contacting Meg Derrer, 616.242.0474.*