

# The Effects of Positive Reinforcement

I wondered about positive reinforcement. Was it really a good thing for coaches to consciously practice? Was it worth the effort to find positive ways to look at, and comment on negative results? Was it worth the effort to use praise when something good was accomplished?

I decided to study the effects of negative and positive reinforcement on college students. I felt I had to choose a skill which students were familiar with but had no idea what were good or poor results. I couldn't very well be convincingly negative if a person sank 24 out of 25 free throws. I chose a skill game from Mexico. It is played with a cup with a handle. On the handle is a string with a ball on the end of the string. The object is to swing the ball up into the cup. Most of you are probably familiar with this game but have only tried it once or twice years ago. That's perfect.

I selected at random 60 students and divided them into two equal groups of thirty. One was the negatively reinforced group, the other the positively reinforced group. No one knew in advance the purpose of the study.

Each individual was given 10 warm-ups to learn some technique and to get acquainted with the skill. Then 25 trials were given and the number of successful attempts were recorded. The following is what was said to the groups:

*The Negatively Reinforced Group:* No comment was given on any successful attempt, just silence. On every fifth attempt, including warm-ups, negative statements were made. For example: "You're not concentrating", "You missed", "You're only 13 for 15", "I thought you would do better", "The last guy was doing better" etc.

*The Positively Reinforced Group:* Positive comments were given on each successful attempt, like "Great job", "Good," and "Super". Every fifth attempt, including warm-ups, positive statements were made. For example: "I like your style", "You're doing great", "Good you're 3 for 15", "I knew you'd do well", "One of the best efforts so far" etc.

Guess which group had the most successful attempts? It wasn't even close. The positively reinforced group was significantly superior. For those statisticians, it was significant at the .01 level of confidence.

On three different occasions during speaking engagements, I have demonstrated the effects of positive and negative reinforcement with two people. I even flipped a coin to insure unbiasedness as to who was reinforced negatively. I know I was lucky but all three times it has worked out right. The positive reinforced people got the ball in that cup more often. Obviously, this had a dramatic effect and makes for a convincing demonstration.

If John jumps offsides, just say, "John, that's not like you" and then praise him when he gets it right. A coach has the power to destroy an individual in an instant but he also has the power to help the greatness of that individual progress to his fullest potential. I encourage everyone in leadership positions to consciously make efforts to be positive. The end result will be more wins, more successes and more friends.

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**Far Better It Is To Dare  
Mighty Things, To Win  
Glorious Triumphs,  
Even Though  
Checkered With  
Failure; Than To Take  
Rank With Those Poor  
Spirits, Who Neither  
Enjoy Much Nor Suffer  
Much, Because  
They Live In The Grey  
Twilight That Knows  
Not Victory Nor Defeat.**

—Theodore Roosevelt

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