

**Excerpt from *Mistakes Worth Making: How to Turn Sports Errors Into Athletic Excellence***

Susan Halden-Brown

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## REVALUING MISTAKES

Sometimes it's not just the mistakes themselves to which we should pay attention—it's the way we look at them. Do you still see mistakes as the villains of the piece, lying in wait to sabotage your every move? That's probably the most common attitude toward them. How much better if we can recast them as teachers or even heroes who help us learn a million skills in life and bridge that yawning gap between mediocrity and excellence. Cheer for the heroes every time!

To put a friendlier face on our mistakes, let's think how they might be of use to us. For instance, try to see your mistakes as . . .

- Challenges that spur you to greater effort
- Events that help you focus more strongly on your goals
- Opportunities that motivate you to do better
- Markers of your progress
- Dress rehearsals, long-odds efforts, or optional extras

*“Sometimes it's not just the mistakes themselves to which we should pay attention—it's the way we look at them.”*

Your choices are limited only by your imagination. It doesn't matter how you make it happen, but somehow you have to turn around that gloomy, negative image of mistakes until you see them as bright, shining, and positive. Work on it! You can give them names or call them by number, keep a list of them under your bed or leave them to your next of kin, *but get fond of them somehow.*

Only when you've brought your mistakes in from the cold are you going to want to do anything positive about managing them. When you do, that's not just going to improve your performance—that's going to rewrite it.

## A Scale of Mistakes

The first thing to take notice of is how big your mistakes are and whether they are detracting from your performances (table 1). This will be very useful later in deciding what to do about them.

**Table 1 Levels of Mistakes**

Mistake	Characteristics	Consequences	Training remedy
Micromistakes	Elite-level errors. Only visible to biomechanics with stopwatches, cameras, or high-tech gear. Mainly relevant to individual sports.	Can decide the medals in elite company. Not relevant to ordinary mortals.	High-tech analysis and biomechanical/specialist correction of technique. Sports psyche details can make a difference too.
Minimistakes	Still very elite-level errors. We make these all the time. Most are natural, unnoticed variations in performance.	Will cost a win in hot company. Most don't matter and will only cause trouble if ignored.	Correct details of technique. Use video. Increase quality of practice. Improve quality of mistakes-management. Apply the sports psyche.
Maximistakes	Our everyday errors. In team and individual sports. Noticed by judges, teammates, officials, and ourselves.	Will cost a win at most levels. Provide clues for further training. Give measures of progress. Cause us to make further mistakes if not corrected.	Correct fundamentals of technique. Raise standards of mistakes-management. Ignore them at our peril! Learn the elements of sports psyche.
Megamistakes	Dramatic disasters.	Cause injury or loss of confidence. Seriously interrupt progress. No fun. Can mostly be avoided.	Improve and apply risk-management. Employ mistakes management. Observe sports best practices. Observe rules of sports. Re-set goals to be within skill levels.

**Micromistakes** Micromistakes are the tiny ones only the camera can see. They fascinate the biomechanical buffs. If you're into that too, then get wired up, get your coach on the easy end of a video camera, and establish the range of miniperformances within which you must work if you are to end up on the awards podium. If you operate within the micromistake range most of the time, you'll probably come home with a bagful of medals. The days that you don't, it will be someone else's turn to win. If you're not at this end of the sport spectrum, or they're not relevant to your sport, ignore these mistakes.



**A nice by-product of almost any skill is that it's pleasing both to watch and to perform. Minimistakes won't compromise this performance.**

**Minimistakes** Minimistakes are the next size up from micromistakes. They are still very high-quality bumbles and will only be in the cards for pretty sophisticated performers. How much of a performance is devoted to them will depend on your skill level and the success of your mistakes-management strategies.

By engineering standards, the physical tolerances of even the most accurate sporting performance are quite broad. The eye that judges them need not be particularly acute to detect differences of skill. Individuals generally operate within quite roomy comfort zones with any number of fail-safe systems in place to preserve their tenure. This all adds up to having quite a lot of latitude in which to make minimistakes on all fronts without necessarily compromising the performance at all.

Having said that, at elite levels too many minimistakes will probably keep you off the awards podium, although they may still go unnoticed by all but the expert eye. At subelite levels, whether or not you pay attention to them and try to correct them will depend on the quality of your training and whether you're going for the big stuff later.

The winning performance, therefore, is not the one without mistakes but the one with the least number of mistakes *that matter at that level*.

A nice by-product of almost any skill is that it's pleasing both to watch and to perform. Whether it is in the magic lines of a javelin thrower, the grace of a gymnast, or the rhythmic power of a football player, the skilled movement of the human body is something we enjoy immensely. None of these performances need be at all compromised by the smaller mistakes in them (even if you or your coach notice them) unless somebody else notices them too. If they don't, you have successfully created the illusion of perfection.

**Maximistakes** Maximistakes are the errors that really matter.

These are the ones that intrude unpleasantly on our efforts, the bloopers and blunders and everyday errors of life. We can't help but notice these and wish we hadn't made them. In the grand scheme of things we've already been making a fistful of less spectacular mistakes, although they have not necessarily had a dramatic effect on our performance. But suddenly we're in trouble. Or so it seems. Perhaps the writing has been on the proverbial wall for quite a while,

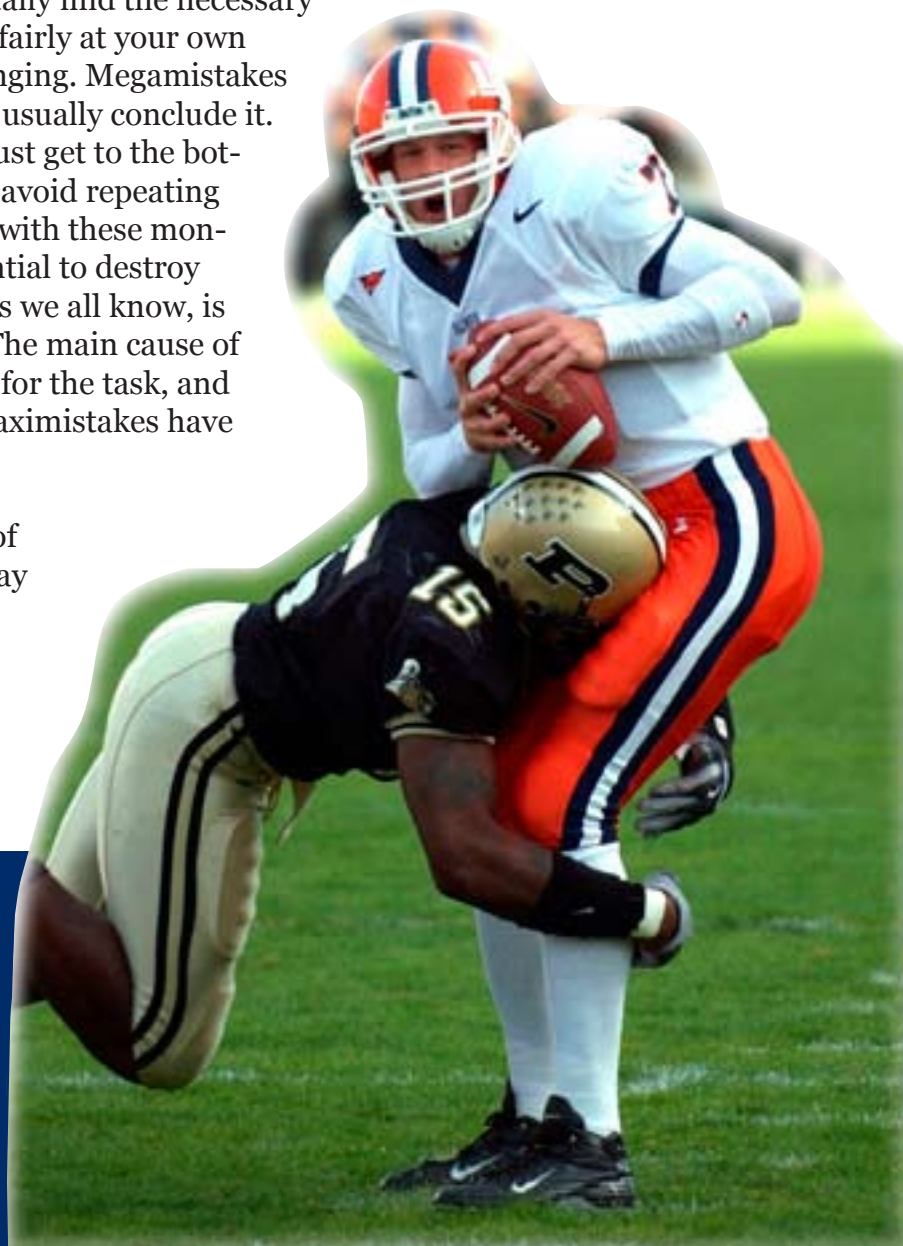
but we were just too busy performing to see it. Usually there's nothing really sudden about these maximistakes other than our waking up to them.

Maximistakes are not unannounced disasters. They are clear indications that we've missed the warning signs of trouble. If we can repackage them, then we can begin to make use of them. We can redefine them as less a mistake and more as a signpost from which to backtrack on our progress and pick up on those minimistakes we previously missed. We can use them to realign our performance and choose training programs that are better tailored to helping us reach our competition goals. In this way, although maximistakes are uncomfortable, they need not feel like catastrophes.

**Megamistakes** Megamistakes are the calamities of consequence. **This is where your hopes and dreams come seriously unstuck.** If they're caused by equipment failure, you can usually find the necessary adjectives and move on. If they're sitting fairly at your own feet, then that becomes a lot more challenging. Megamistakes do not compromise a performance—they usually conclude it. As with all other errors, of course, you must get to the bottom of why they happened if you want to avoid repeating them. It's especially important to do this with these monsters, as they have an unreasonable potential to destroy confidence on all sides, and confidence, as we all know, is the glue that sticks everything together. The main cause of megamistakes is insufficient preparation for the task, and they are always a warning that serious maximistakes have been overlooked.

A word here about the curious tendency of mistakes to snowball. They tend not to stay one size but to grow gradually over time. If you don't pick up on them early, they often quietly and remorselessly gather momentum until they burst into your life and you are forced to acknowledge

**Megamistakes are the CALAMITIES of consequence. Megamistakes do not compromise a performance—they usually CONCLUDE it.**



their presence. Minimistakes often grow into maxies over time, and it's not a pretty picture. The thing is to get to them *early*. The more that things go wrong, the more you need to look to the fundamentals of your skills and the less you should focus on the high-quality details. It's in the fundamentals that you'll find the cause of your mistakes. Early corrections that were misinterpreted, first principles that were misunderstood, foundation skills that were not sufficiently cemented before the next story was built on them—these are what cause real trouble later on, when you had long forgotten any original difficulties you may have had learning new skills or getting your head around new ideas. For years you may have assumed that your skills were rock solid. Perhaps they were, but so may your mistakes have been, carefully embedded in your early work. So take care and notice with an uncompromising eye for detail the size and quality of your mistakes. Then ask yourself . . .

- *Would I like my performance to improve by 10%?*
- *Are my mistakes getting in the way of winning?*
- *Are my mistakes undermining my confidence?*
- *Have my mistakes already caused me—or do they have the potential to cause me—injury?*


If the answer to any of these is yes, then you have a strong case for better mistakes management. Establish an overview of your current mistakes-management plan by doing the following:

- Identify the size of your mistakes.
- Decide which ones you can tolerate (this depends on the standard you want to reach).
- Decide which ones you need to manage.
- Establish how often you're making these mistakes.
- Keep this overview of your performance to compare with later ones.

You've now discovered that **the most important thing to know about mistakes is that they are absolutely inevitable, and that they come in different sizes.** You're close to accepting that you can't get through life without making them. So rather than trying to exclude them from your training, you're now resigned to include them and to quickly get good at making the best of them. Let's see what you can do.

## **SURVIVAL MISTAKES**

Let's begin with some of your earliest, most experimental mistakes. Undoubtedly some were life threatening, and clearly these are the most important ones from which to recover well. As a kid, you probably tried to drink scalding-hot soup, possibly tried piloting your skateboard up a tree or into a wall, and maybe later tried the same thing with a car but fared no better. Having survived the consequences, your survival mistakes have served as crucial lessons in how to successfully interact with your environment. The more adept you become at minimizing these mistakes, the better your chances of reaching a fine old age.



**The first and most important thing to learn in sport is how to survive it. To do that we make some necessary, and possibly hair-raising, discoveries.**

Exactly the same principles apply to sporting performances. The first and most important thing to learn in sport is how to survive it. To do that we make some necessary, and possibly hair-raising, discoveries. We fall off bicycles, skates, high bars, and horses. We slip, skid, and slide into goalposts, guardrails, and similarly unforgiving furniture. We get in the way of bats, rackets, sticks, and other gear and innocently confront seriously destructive missiles hit, hurled, or flung at us with murderous intent. We inevitably fail to duck some of this potentially deadly shrapnel and may thereafter bear the lifelong imprints of it on our bodies or embedded in our psyches. We may try drowning. We might break a bone or two. We get run into, run over,

stamped on, and squashed. All this we survive but only by getting a handle on the activities. Otherwise, soon enough, we'll be in the sort of drama that doesn't leave much to be negotiated.

For those of us who take a little longer to learn how to organize a pain-free lifestyle, here is a new sticker—just as a reminder—for your refrigerator door:



***It's smarter  
to survive.***

## ***Example***

Attempting a new ski run is a good way to cartwheel into the snow (minimistake, but no harm done). Failing to train for the challenges of the run is definitely setting yourself up for a fall (maximistake, and possibly painful). Ignoring good advice that the run is altogether too difficult for you is a recipe for disaster (megamistake, which may conclude your skiing career).



## Training Strategies

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To make only minimistakes, try this good advice:

- Always observe the best practices of your sport. Education is the key to this. Know the risks. Learn the form.
- *Never* take liberties with ill-fitting or unsafe gear.
- *Do not* break the rules; they are there for good reasons.
- *Listen* to experienced, qualified people who want to help you.
- Always train and compete using your sport's best practices to minimize the possibilities of making maxi- or megamistakes. As your skills improve, some risks may lessen, but don't bank on it.

## Biggest Risks

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- Ignorance (which really is bliss)
- Complacency (which really can hurt)

## FEEL-GOOD AND FOLLOW-UP MISTAKES

Another mistake we learned very early in life was the *feel-good mistake*. This mistake leaves us feeling better than we did before we made it. As children we particularly enjoyed that these mistakes attracted lots of people to our rescue. This pleasure does not diminish as we are scooped up by friends, coaches, and teammates later in life. In competition, these mistakes may even rally the whole crowd to our support, and in so doing are useful in wrong-footing our opponent. When this happens, we have made a feel-good mistake, and regardless of what the scoreboard says, we are the winner.

For a while in international soccer, feel-good mistakes were overused as players writhed in apparent agony to enlist the crowd's sympathy and disrupt the opposition's play. However, because such antics interrupted the flow of the game, the rules were changed to prohibit it. As a result, when players discovered that they weren't being noticed, they sprang hastily to their feet and hurried back to their positions. That didn't feel good at all.

Feel-good mistakes are the ultimate spontaneous mistake. They are also the easiest and fastest mistakes from which to recover. But beware! They have an idiosyncrasy all their own. Because they impact well on your performance, it is easy to underestimate the extent to which they can distract you from your task. This very often results in a *follow-up mistake* that may be very costly and negate the positive effects of the feel-good mistake. **Follow-up mistakes, as their name suggests, happen on the heels of the main mistake.** Usually they are a result of the distraction and disorder caused by the original mistake, and before you know what's hit you, you are in even worse trouble! They are real confidence-shakers because after two different types of mistakes in a row, it's practically impossible not to expect a third. If you make another mistake now, your first thought is that your whole performance is falling apart.

## Example

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You mis-hit a drive up the fairway, but it somehow makes it onto the green (feel-good mistake). The crowd roars its approval, but unless you move on and successfully refocus, the long putt is likely to be a follow-up error. Let that one get to you and you miss the short putt too.

## Training Strategies

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- The disruption to the rhythm of your performance caused by feel-good mistakes is what you have to train for. Refocusing is the key here. You need to practice challenging your concentration with all sorts of distractions and then refocusing on your task.
- See just how many popped balloons or car horns it takes to put you off your stride or disrupt your game. Take time to refocus and measure your success by the presence or absence of follow-up errors. Then get quicker at doing this.
- Never let your sense of humor desert you. If the fun goes out of the training sessions, then the fun will also go out of the competitions. Once that happens, you're on the road to burnout.
- Run a fun check from time to time. When did you last laugh in training? When did you last laugh at something you did?
- Talk to your coach. He needs to keep the fun in the sport too.

## Biggest Risks

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- Underestimating the ability of the feel-good mistake to distract you.
- Making follow-up mistakes that move in with a vengeance.
- Having the fun go out of your sport. That's a shortcut to dropping out.

See table 2 for a summary of survival, feel-good, and follow-up mistakes.

**Table 2** Sorting Out Your Mistakes

Type of mistake	Characteristics	Consequences	Action
Survival mistakes	Not usually much fun. Always in the cards but mostly avoidable.	Can be huge! Real confidence-wreckers and injury prospects if mismanaged.	Practice risk management and respect your sport.
Feel-good mistakes	The ultimate spontaneous mistake. Feel better after mistake than before. Easiest mistake from which to recover.	Attracts lots of attention. Brings others to our "rescue." Positive impact on performance. Can be distracting and lead to more errors.	Join in the good humor. Enjoy! Take care to refocus.
Follow-up mistakes	Follows a previous mistake. Usually caused by distraction.	Negates effects of a feel-good mistake. Shakes confidence.	Get body and mind back on the job. Use positive imagery. Focus, focus, focus!

Focus on the  
fundamentals!

It's  
smarter  
to  
survive!

Mistakes =  
Opportunity to  
do better!

## About the Author

**Sue Halden-Brown** is a sport psychology instructor, coach, and examiner and educator with the Australian coach accreditation system. As a coach, Halden-Brown has lent her expertise to help both national and international equestrians and pentathletes to Olympic competition. She is the coauthor of the central text for the Australian equestrian coach education system and the director of the Five-Star Equestrian Training Centre, a training and education facility for equestrian athletes and coaches.

Halden-Brown holds a bachelor of applied sciences in sport studies (coaching) from the University of Canberra and was the recipient of the Australian Coaching Council's Coaching Excellence award in 1994. She resides in Bungendore, New South Wales, Australia.

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