

## Using In-Season Evaluation to Affect Positive Change

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Are you on track? Is your plan working? Have you stopped to ask these questions? Everyone does an evaluation at the end of the season. This is important, but it's too late to change anything for the season you're in right now. Effective evaluation must be on-going throughout the training period, and it must be used to affect positive change. In order for change to occur, the evaluation needs to impact the plan.



We typically give the evaluation some thought on a regular basis, but often fail to look deep enough, fail to use the evaluation to modify the plan and act on the new plan, or fail to re-evaluate the effectiveness of the new plan.

When you evaluate, do you get to the heart of the issue? Are all factors considered? This is important. If you find a crack in the floor in your house, you could fix the wood, but if the crack was caused by a problem in the foundation, you haven't corrected the problem by fixing the wood. The plan is flawed because the evaluation wasn't deep enough. In our sport, the heart of the problem can be many things. When you evaluate a technical or tactical issue, is it the root cause, or is it a result of a more fundamental deficiency? Have you considered equipment? Perhaps it's not responding properly due to fit, lack of maintenance, or overuse. If you build a plan around a technical progression and the issue is equipment, the result will be frustration and time lost trying to work toward a goal. Fitness or nutrition may be affecting the performance. Perhaps the obstacle to learning a difficult skill is fear. The plan will need to address the fear if the obstacle is to be overcome. More difficult to evaluate for the coach but often a significant factor in performance decline can be social or family issues, or challenges in school. Is fatigue or overtraining a factor? Our tendency is to work harder to improve results, but in this case a better plan would be to take time off. Don't rush evaluation and take a big picture view.

These evaluation factors focused on improving negative performance. Evaluation is just as important when athletes are in a period of high performance. One of the most important discoveries we make is learning what factors make up our best performances. If we regularly document and evaluate what we did that made us perform well, we can incrementally increase our level and consistency of performance. A caution when using results alone as an evaluation tool – keep an eye on the long-term goal. Sometimes when we're on a roll with results, our eye is less critical, and problems may be hidden behind strengths that we overlook in the short term that will have negative impact in the long term. Again, it goes to taking a deep evaluation.

A good evaluation is no good without a plan of action based on that evaluation. Tough decisions may need to be made. This is the core of athlete management. USSA recognizes that fundamental skill development is at the heart of what we do. Most often, we are evaluating a technical or tactical skill issue in our in-season evaluation. A proper plan to address this issue may be contrary to short-term competition goals to achieve long-term competition goals. Evaluate what is most important, and don't be afraid to take a step back and really fix the problem before jumping back into the competition fire. These are tough decisions that seem like a gamble (missing a competition opportunity), but by not taking the time to validate the evaluation by following a plan to fix the issue, are we not taking a bigger gamble? One direction is playing the odds (more competitions = more chances), the other direction is targeted, focused, and aimed at making the odds in the game more in our favor. Over the long run, what strategy will have the best payoff?

With a plan in place that follows a deep evaluation, the execution should be the easy part. It should come boosted by the confidence of taking the right steps and putting in the work to make positive change.

During and following the execution, evaluation has to take place again. The evaluation and planning part, even when well thought out, isn't always going to be perfect, even for the most skilled. Mistakes will be made, there are too many variables in play. We can't fear these mistakes. Through proper evaluation we will learn from these mistakes and hopefully avoid repeating them in the future.

Evaluation happens regularly with every coach and athlete. But like refining a technique, evaluation is a skill that can be improved through practice. Pay attention to when and how you use the evaluation process. Chances are your training results will quickly improve and you'll soon see the performance benefit in competition.