

Letter to Your Athlete/Coach:

Dear Coaches & Athletes

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Burnout, pressure, and emotional exhaustion are common in competitive sports. Still, many athletes struggle to open up to their coaches about these challenges. This piece shares two interconnected letters—one from an athlete’s perspective and the other from a coach’s—offering honest insight into both sides of the experience.

The athlete’s letter captures the difficult balance between meeting expectations and the fear of letting others down. It reflects the inner struggle between loving the sport and feeling overwhelmed by stress. The coach’s letter responds with empathy and reflection, drawing from personal experience to emphasize why mental health matters just as much as physical training. Rest matters. Open communication matters.

Together, these letters create a dialogue about shared responsibility in maintaining well-being in sports. They acknowledge that both coaches and athletes are constantly learning and growing, navigating challenges together. This reflective exchange encourages healthier conversations, supports self-care, and reminds us that true strength in sports comes from balance, not from pushing until you break.

Dear Coaches,

Lately, I have been feeling off, not just physically, but deep down. The sport I used to love does not feel the same anymore. I still train, still show up, still push through every drill and correction, but something inside me has changed.

You tell me to shake it off, to train harder, or to focus more. I try. Every day, I try. But somehow, I end up making more “mistakes” in the process.

When you tell me it is my fault, I nod and pretend it does not hurt—but it does. It stings like a knife to the heart, because I already know it is my fault. The sound of correction lingers long after practice ends. I am afraid to open up to you, to admit that I am tired, overwhelmed, or unsure if I can keep going. When I try to speak, my lungs feel suffocated and my tongue twists. I love this sport with everything in me, yet lately, I have started to hate myself for not being enough in it.

Everyone talks about my potential, about the bright future ahead of me. But sometimes I wonder—at what cost? What is the point of feeding my potential if I have to lose pieces of myself to get there? If the cost is crying myself to sleep or forcing myself out of bed for another morning training, pretending I am fine when I am not, then what is the point?

I miss the version of myself who trained every day for hours because it made her feel alive and joyful, not because she was scared of falling behind or disappointing the people who mean the most to her such as fans, family, friends, and coaches.

Maybe this is not me giving up. Maybe it is me asking for help or at least asking someone to understand that loving the game should not mean losing yourself in it.

Sincerely,
Your Athlete

Dear Athletes,

I am not just a coach. I have walked in your shoes before. I know what it feels like to chase excellence while the world expects you to never miss a step.

I was once a USA National Team member, a high school student balancing honors classes, and a varsity athlete in a completely different sport—all while holding myself to impossible standards during a decade when a 1500 SAT score felt average. I understand the weight of early mornings, late practices, and the silent pressure to be perfect from fans, family, coaches, and peers. I have felt the exhaustion of smiling through stress and depression, the loneliness of being “strong,” and the fear and anxiety of becoming a “disappointment.”

I remember standing in the competition venue, bright lights blurring through watery eyes, as everyone stared at the screen waiting for judges to post my score while every mistake replayed in my mind like a film I could not pause.

I remember the intense summer and winter camps before Nationals and Team Trials. These were long weeks of training, exhaustion, and immense pressure from coaches and teammates. Those camps built my toughness, but they also took a toll on my mental health. They tested whether I truly loved the sport or simply the idea of it. Being away from home all day and being constantly compared to others made it easy to lose joy in what I once loved.

I started Taekwondo (Freestyle Poomsae) late, and it made me feel like a failure before I even began. Everyone else seemed two steps ahead in a walking race while I was sprinting just to keep up. Burnout became my norm. I thought exhaustion was the price of success. I thought the weight on my chest meant I was getting closer to my goals. I did not realize that weight was actually holding me back.

So, I say this to let you know—I understand. You have been fighting hard, maybe too hard. You keep telling yourself, just as I once did, that one more rep, one more hour, one more sacrifice will make it all worth it. Maybe I have even reinforced that belief. But here is the truth: it will not mean anything if you lose yourself in the process.

I have taught you that toughness means pushing through everything—pain, exhaustion, doubt. That was never my intention. Athletes are not the only ones learning; coaches are too. Real strength is not about how much you can endure. Real strength is about knowing when to stop, breathe, and take care of yourself. Mental health is not a weakness. It is the foundation that allows your potential to truly matter.

You do not have to earn rest. During my athletic career, I often reflected on the phrase, “**Recovery is still training.**” A day off does not erase the hours you have put in. A day off rebuilds you so you can keep going. The body heals in silence, and the mind needs that same grace. Just because you do not see it does not mean it is not happening.

You owe it to yourself to pause when you need to. To talk to someone when your world feels like it falling apart. To remember that success is not defined by medals, scores, or expectations—it is shaped by your journey. You are the laughter during warm-ups, the teammate who lifts others up. You are not just an athlete. You are a human being with feelings and needs. You are a story still being written, and that is what gives our sport—**your** sport—its meaning.

Best regards,

Your Coach