



BETTER ATHLETES  
BETTER PEOPLE

# Your Athlete's Emotional Tank

*Chapter 7 Excerpt from PCA Founder Jim Thompson's book The High School Sports Parent*

Have you ever stumbled onto something so basic and powerful that it changes the way you see almost everything?

For years I wondered why I could feel great about a talk I gave on Thursday night and feel terrible about the same talk to a similar group on Saturday morning. Then I read about the "Emotional Tank" in Ross Campbell's wonderful book, *How to Really Love Your Child*. Each of us has an Emotional Tank like the gas tank in a car. If our tank is empty, we can't expect to drive across the country. If our tank is full, we can go a long way.

On Thursday, people in the audience filled my Emotional Tank. They nodded their head when I spoke. They smiled and laughed at my jokes. They asked questions indicating they were engaged with my ideas. Some even thanked me afterwards for an insight they believed might help them be a better coach or parent.

On Saturday morning, no one did anything to fill my Emotional Tank. They scowled, nodded off, talked to each other when I was talking. They drained my Emotional Tank.

No wonder I felt like a gift to the audience on Thursday night and a fraud on Saturday morning. And it all revolved around what was happening to a tank I didn't even know I had.

## The Portable Home Team Advantage

Athletes do better when their Emotional Tanks are full. We all could use a "portable home team advantage" in our lives. Unconditional support and genuine praise encourages us and improves performance and attitude.

An athlete with a drained Emotional Tank likely will not perform as well as that same athlete with an overflowing Emotional Tank. That's partly why the home team wins almost 60 percent of the time in college and professional sports.

Athletes with full Emotional Tanks are more coachable. They are more open to coaches' suggestions. When Emotional Tanks are full, people tend to be optimistic, deal better with adversity, and are more capable of changing their behavior in response to feedback given to them, even by their parents!

When Emotional Tanks are low, people tend to be pessimistic, give up more easily, and become defensive in the face of criticism.

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## Filling and Draining Your Teen's Emotional Tank

The Emotional Tank is a powerful idea, but it is not rocket science. You can fill your teen's tank in these ways:

### TANK FILLERS

### EXAMPLES

Truthful, specific praise

- "Nice effort! You hustled and fought for four quarters."
- "An 'A' on your math test! I noticed you studied hard to prepare for the test."

Express appreciation

- "It was great the way you pumped up your teammates before the team made its comeback."
- "Thanks for helping out with your little sister."

Listening

- "What else did you like about the game?"
- "What did you think of the election?"

Nonverbal actions

- Smiling, clapping, nodding, thumbs up

Praise can be a tank-filler, but it needs to be truthful and specific. It's fine to say "Good job." But it is so much more powerful to say, "I really appreciated the way you took so much care with this project. Your hard work and attention to detail made this a big success."

Be careful not to heap praise when it isn't warranted. Teens are very discerning about what's real and what's disingenuous, especially with parents.

Listening is one of the most powerful tank fillers, especially when parents really listen. Adopt a tell-me-more-attitude to understand what's going on for your teen and to foster healthy dialogue.

While we all need refreshers in tank filling, most of us are pretty natural tank drainers. We often find it easier to see what is wrong and comment on it than to reinforce laudable behavior. Here are common tank drainers:

### TANK DRAINERS

### EXAMPLES

Criticize and correct

- "You could have gotten more loose balls. Be more aggressive, like Maria."
- "That grade isn't good enough. Next time it better be an A."

Sarcasm

- "What were you thinking on that play?"
- "Will you ever clean your room?"

Ignoring

- "Not now."
- "Maybe later."

Nonverbal

- Frowning, eye-rolling, heavy sighing



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## The Magic Ratio

Research has shown that the optimal ratio of tank-fillers to criticisms is 5 to 1. Professor John Gottman at the University of Washington calls this the Magic Ratio. I love that name because you really do see some magical things happen as you get close to a 5:1 ratio of positives to criticisms.

In Gottman's work with married couples, he found that couples at the 5:1 level tended to stay married, while at lower ratios divorces were more likely. Research in the classroom also indicates a 5:1 ratio is ideal to stimulate children's learning.

You might consider keeping track of your "plus/minus" ratio for a while to see what your baseline is. Then work to get it up to the Magic level and enjoy the results.

## Criticism Transformed

Although criticism tends to drain people's tanks, it is not a bad thing. Criticism can help all of us grow and improve. But the catch is we have to be open to hearing and considering the criticism. And that is where the Emotional Tank transforms criticism into "receivable feedback."

Part of being a parent is having hard conversations with our kids when necessary. And being a consistent tank-filler doesn't mean you will never have to have a hard conversation with your son or daughter. But it does mean that your teen will be more likely to change in response to that hard conversation.

Here are some proven ways of making it more likely that your athlete will hear you and consider your feedback.

**a.) Avoid Non-Teachable Moments:** There are some moments when it's harder for people to hear and receive criticism. Right after your athlete strikes out with the bases loaded is not a good time to discuss the benefits of resiliency. There's just too much emotional turmoil. Wait out non-teachable moments and keep your powder dry for later.

**b.) Criticize in Private:** It's easier to hear criticism in private than in front of others where it is easy to feel embarrassed and become defensive. Respect your teen's need for dignity by talking to her privately.

**c.) Ask Permission:** Sometimes you can short-circuit defensiveness by "asking permission." "Emily, I noticed something about the way you were dealing with a teammate that concerned me. Are you open to hearing it?" If Emily says yes, she is more likely to consider your comment. If she says no, you create great curiosity in her by saying, "Okay, no problem. Let me know if you change your mind." If you come back with the same question later, she is likely to say yes.

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**d.) If-Then Statements:** People are more likely to take criticism if they feel in control. If-Then Statements do this. "If you get your homework done tonight, then you'll be able to sleep in later in the morning."

**e.) Criticism Sandwich:** By sandwiching your criticism between two positive statements, you make it more likely that it will be heard.

### Triple-Impact Competitors Are Tank-Fillers

So far I've focused on you filling your child's Emotional Tank. But Triple-Impact Competitors are themselves tank fillers. Level 2 of the Triple-Impact Competitor model is about making teammates better, and a principal way Triple-Impact Competitors do that is by filling the E-Tanks of their teammates.

You can start to help your athlete become a proficient E-Tank Filler by talking about your own experience with it. If you had a tough day at work, when you get home you can say, "Boy, I had a tough day today. I felt like my E-Tank was being drained all day long." If your teen expresses appreciation for something you have done, you can say, "Thank you! That really fills my E-Tank."

You can also use a process we call "narrated modeling" to make sure that people don't misinterpret or even miss completely what you are doing. Simply share your process with your athlete. "My colleague at work was pretty down today, so I went out of my way to find something I could tell her to fill her tank. And I think it helped because she was much more positive and energetic the rest of the day."

Talking about filling E-Tanks and modeling tank-filling behavior in the home can be a powerful determiner of whether your teen becomes a tank-filler.

And people who fill Emotional Tanks are likely to be successful in whatever they do in life.

### Sometimes You Have to Fill Your Own Tank

The world is often unforgiving. Your teen may one day have to perform in an environment where no one will fill her Emotional Tank. Some people believe that the way to prepare young people for "the real world" is to get them used to nasty behavior (e.g., via a nasty, snarly coach) so they will be used to it when they encounter it in the larger world.

I reject this idea. I am convinced that people who grow up having their Emotional Tanks filled on a regular basis are going to be more able to deal effectively with bullies or other tank drainers they cannot avoid (such as an abusive boss). For one thing, they may not be as willing to submit to demeaning behavior as people who have been beaten down by long-term tank-draining behavior. They also are less likely to blame themselves for a supervisor's abusive behavior. They are more likely to say, "My boss is a jerk, but I don't need to let it get to me. I'm going to continue doing my job until I can find a better one."

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