

Letters to a Young Athlete

What's in it for me? Life wisdom from a basketball legend.

Basketball was Chris Bosh's life. As a kid, he'd play in his driveway long after the sun went down. By the end of his career, he'd won two NBA championships and a gold medal at the Beijing Olympics. Sadly, Bosh's career ended in 2015. A doctor had identified a blood clot forming in his leg. If he were to continue playing, there was a chance the clot could break loose and get caught in his heart, lungs, or brain. He could even die on the court. Forced into early retirement, Bosh reflected on his journey. What could he tell that young athlete, that kid playing basketball in the driveway? And what could he tell anyone who dreamed of greatness? In these blinks, you'll learn

why you must train past your limits; why you must check your ego and commit to the team; and how to handle winning and losing with equal grace.

To play past your limits, you must train past them.

The pass appeared effortless. LeBron James tossed up a three-point shot in the final seconds of game six of the 2013 NBA Finals, Heat versus Spurs. The ball bounced from the rim. Bosh, the Heat's center, was surrounded by Spurs players. He leaped up, snatched the ball, and within an instant, passed it to Ray Allen. Allen, just as quickly, stepped behind the three-point line. With five Spurs players rushing to block, Allen took the shot. He made it. The key message here is: To play beyond your present limits, you must train past them. From Bosh to Allen, the play appeared effortless, despite the pressure of 20,000 screaming fans, millions of viewers, and the exhaustion resulting from over 80 games that season. Bosh executed the pass automatically, instantly, because for decades he had trained himself to go beyond his perceived limits of physical and mental exhaustion. Years of running suicide drills back and forth across the court had taught his burning lungs and screaming muscles to suck in oxygen and find that boost. He had learned, as ultramarathon runner and ex-Navy SEAL David Goggins says, that when you think you're running on empty, you still have 40 percent left in the tank. Bosh learned that he had to train past the limits of exhaustion because he was going to have to perform past the limits of exhaustion. The life lesson here is that you need to always push yourself further than you think you can go. That doesn't mean you should suppress the little voice in your head saying that you can't continue. In fact, It is precisely this awareness of being exhausted which you need to embrace. By doing so, you'll slowly build the mental and physical strength you'll need to progress beyond your limits and grow to embrace exhaustion. Make no mistake – training in this way is brutally hard. But by pushing yourself to the limit, you'll discover what comedian Jerry Seinfeld called “your blessing in life ... the torture you're most comfortable with.” However, building your resilience in the face of exhaustion is just one side of the coin. To keep it strong over the course of a career, you're going to need deep motivation, which is the topic of the next blink.

To strengthen your passion, combine it

with a higher purpose.

Years before his professional career, Bosh played for his high school basketball team in southeastern Dallas, Texas. Bosh was always in the gym, running drills with his coach, Thomas Hill. One day, Coach Hill stopped Bosh in the middle of his drills and looked him in the eyes. He asked Bosh what he wanted to do with this. This? Bosh thought to himself. What did Hill mean, this? Here's the key message: To strengthen your passion, combine it with a higher purpose. At first, Bosh didn't know what to say to his coach. He stammered and muttered something about the drill, about winning the state championship. Hill pushed him to think deeper, to find the reason why he was pursuing basketball in the first place. At Coach Hill's prompting, Bosh came to understand that while he loved basketball, the sport itself wasn't his motivation. It was actually that he wanted to be his best self – his true motivation was to honor the gift that life had given him. Why are you pursuing what you are pursuing? Why does it matter to you? Whether you're an aspiring hockey player or physicist, probe your motives until you reach a purpose that will both sustain you through losses and keep you level in victory. You don't need to come up with something right away, and your motivation can change over time, but you can rule out money. Money is, at best, a temporary boost. Even then, it often fails. Take the 2019 NFL Playoffs, for example. Sean Payton, coach of the New Orleans Saints hired armed guards to walk through the locker room after game time with \$120,000 in crisp bills. The amount represented the bonus each team member would win for winning the championship. Payton was looking to instill a little extra motivation for the next four games. The Saints lost. This isn't to say that a fixation on cash cost the Saints the Superbowl. However, it pales in comparison to the motivation the Saints tapped into a few years earlier. Back in 2006, on the night the New Orleans Superdome finally reopened after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, Coach Payton gathered the Saints to watch a video. In it, clips alternated between their season thus far and images of the ruined city left by the hurricane. The Saints then took the field under a banner that read, "Our home. Our team. Be a saint." They were playing to resurrect their city. That night, the Saints kicked off three seasons in which they would play with a now-legendary level of hunger, spirit, and purpose.

Ego is the enemy of improvement.

Chris Bosh was only 19 years old when, in 2003, he got drafted by the Toronto Raptors. Bosh – smart, fast, and nearly seven feet tall – had always been a star. But now, in the NBA, Bosh was going against teams full of stars whose fame greatly eclipsed his own. At first, he struggled to get the ball, and when he did get it, his shots kept failing. His opponents ran over him. Bosh fell into despair and let his defense fall apart. One night before a game in San Antonio, his coach Sam Harris decided to bench him. Bosh was not to play that night. The key message here is: Ego is the enemy of improvement. After being benched, Coach Harris helped Bosh discover the real reason he was failing. It wasn't inexperience – it was ego. Ego, of course, is that natural but pernicious urge to put yourself over others, and to turn away from anything that threatens your heroic, starring role in the drama unfolding around you. Bosh's ego was telling him that he had to be the one with his hands on the ball. Ego was telling him that he had to be the one to score. To stop his free fall, Bosh had to forget what his ego told him he should be. Instead, he had to do whatever he could to become what his team needed. So Bosh changed course and started giving 100 percent of his energy to his team's needs. He played hard on defense in Toronto, and soon enough the ball came to him and his shots

went in. By playing selflessly, he made himself essential. And by stowing his ego and committing to his team, Bosh began playing at a whole new level. Over the 13 years of his NBA career, Bosh pulled double digits in rebounds, assists, and scoring. He became a star. In 2016, three years after a blood clot ended his career, Chris Bosh walked once more onto the court at Miami's American Airlines Arena. As he did, the crowd of 20,000 erupted into thunderous applause. That night, the Heat ceremoniously retired his number. The team's president Pat Riley delivered the commemoration of Bosh's stellar career. In particular, Riley spoke of what he called the biggest assist in the Heat's history – Bosh's effortless pass to Ray Allen in the final seconds of game six in 2013. For Bosh, the glory of having his jersey raised into the rafter wasn't just that he would be remembered, but that he would be remembered as a player who fought for his team.

To build your team, lead by example and cultivate communication.

When Chris Bosh landed in Miami in 2010, he came to play alongside Dwayne Wade and LeBron James, two of the best to ever grace the game. The press called them the “Big Three”. Then, in 2012, Ray Allen joined the team, an event that propelled the team into the annals of NBA history. But in the locker room, or in the huddle, there was another player the team would often look to for guidance. His name was Juwan Howard. Howard was nearing 40 when the Big Three came together, and for most of those ascendant seasons, Howard played just a few minutes per game. He was often on the sidelines, fully dressed in a suit. But every morning, Howard was the first in the weight room or on the treadmill. Before and after each practice, Howard was putting in hours with extra shots and drills. Howard wasn't a star. He was a leader. The key message here is: To build your team, lead by example and cultivate communication. Players like Howard make an immeasurable impact on their teams. They tap into its collective soul, read the moment, and do whatever is necessary. In practical terms, this sort of contribution requires effective communication, which, like any other skill, takes knowledge and practice. There are a few things you need to do in order to become a true leader. First, you have to learn the lingo of your sport. As a player on the soccer pitch, you have to learn what a dummy run is, or, as a water polo player, the meaning of an eggbeater or a dry pass. Second, you have to know your audience. If one teammate responds poorly to shouting but another thrives on its energy, you need to know what works best for each individual. That means building relationships, sharing meals, and spending time with each other away from the court, pitch, or pool. But perhaps most importantly, you have to remember that communication is not monologuing or lecturing. You have to listen, mediate conflict when necessary, and absorb honest criticism. Teams without communication and leadership fall apart, no matter how talented individual players might be. In contrast, teams with communication and leadership thrive in adversity. They act as a single organism and always meet the moment. From the strongest to the weakest player, they are prepared to do whatever the team needs. They trust one another, rely on another, and by and large, they win more. And, as we'll see in the next blink, when they do lose, they face their failure with honesty and courage. They get to work.

Don't get too high from winning, or too low from losing.

In the first season of the Big Three, the Heat dominated the league. Bosh remembers how high he felt at the time. He was on one of the most talented teams ever assembled, and felt that the championship was as good as won. Seneca, a Roman stoic philosopher, would have advised Bosh to cool down – and to avoid what he called “transports of delight.” As the famous intellectual said, “joy leads to exultation, and exultation leads to swaggering and excessive self-esteem.” In other words, when you get too high from a win, you become complacent and blind to your faults. Meanwhile, your opponents see those faults and redouble their efforts to bring you down. In the 2011 NBA finals, this is precisely what happened – the Dallas Mavericks out-worked the Heat and won the championship. The key message here is: Don’t get too high from winning, or too low from losing. When the Mavericks beat the Heat in the NBA Finals, Bosh wept on national television. He wanted to disappear. But what would have been a better response? For a good model, we can look to Karl Malone. In 1997, Malone led the Utah Jazz against the Chicago Bulls in the NBA Finals. Malone was a legendarily powerful player, but had never won a championship. But like any other elite player, he fiercely wanted to win. In game six, the last of the series, he ground his way through Michael Jordan, Scottie Pippin, and Dennis Rodman to score 31 points. But it wasn’t enough. The Jazz lost. Malone would never again get so close to a championship. That night after the game, Malone jogged out to the Bulls’ team bus. He climbed the steps and shook the hand of every player of the team who had just beaten him. He hugged Jordan, congratulated him, and left the bus with a smile. By facing his defeat with bravery and honesty, Malone not only demonstrated maturity and humility – he helped preserve his own self-respect and peace of mind. Bosh learned an important lesson from Malone. Losing may hurt, but when you’ve played for a purpose that goes beyond fame or money, a loss is not an injury to your soul. Instead, it’s an opportunity to become physically and mentally stronger, help forge a tighter team, and become a better person.

Value your health, your future, and your peace of mind.

LeBron James stretches. James stretches when he gets up in the morning and before he goes to bed at night. He stretches before and after every workout, every practice, and every game. His stretching routine takes half an hour, and he’s known to do it almost at random. Even in the middle of a card game. James also employs personal chefs for his strictly calibrated diet, massage therapists for his recovery, and personal trainers to hone his conditioning. All in all, James invests about \$1.5 million per year in this sort of self-care. He’s also in his 18th year of professional basketball and is often cited as the greatest basketball player of all time. The key message here is: Value your health, your future, and your peace of mind. The days of Babe Ruth are gone. You cannot smoke cigarettes, guzzle alcohol, and chomp down hot dogs and expect to perform at an elite level. The imperative of taking care of yourself also applies to your mental state. Bosh, for example, adopted meditation practices to strengthen his focus, recall, and peace of mind. Plenty of other athletes seek out therapy to manage the multitude of stresses that accompany professional sports. Your coaches and teammates care about you, but at the end of the day, no one can be as invested in your long-term health as you. After all, as an athlete, your body is your ultimate investment. So, as you progress in your training, make sure to learn the difference between being exhausted, the sort of state that you can and should push through, and being injured. You also have to discern between constructive criticism from trusted sources, such as your coach and teammates, and negativity that you should ignore. This can take the forms of social media chatter, media

drama, or even trash talk from opponents. Take Kawhi Leonard. In 2017, while playing for the San Antonio Spurs, he suffered a serious leg injury. Leonard sat out to rehabilitate, but pressure started mounting from both fans and the franchise for him to get back on the court. He was, after all, the star of the Spurs. Leonard refused, knowing he hadn't fully healed, and his refusal likely cost him his job. The Spurs traded him to the Raptors. In the following season, when Leonard was convinced that he had healed, he led the Raptors to the championship – and won the finals.

If you want to reach your potential, you've got to put in the work, whatever that may be.

Plenty of people show up to watch Stephen Curry play with the Golden State Warriors. Those in the know arrive early and check out Curry's pregame routine, a 20-minute series of drills cycling through a wild variety of positions. Curry executes a similar, but longer, series of drills after each practice, taking over 300 shots before he quits. Curry is arguably the best shooter in NBA history, and has been for years. Even if he scored fewer shots, no one would think less of him. He's a legend. Yet Curry persists with hundreds and hundreds of shots because that's what it takes to play at his fullest potential. Here's the key message: If you want to reach your potential, you've got to put in the work, whatever that may be. An important aspect of Curry's routine is that it's not random. The shots and moves are choreographed down to each moment. Throughout the various drills, Curry is continuously visualizing and focusing on his weaknesses. Yes, even Stephen Curry has weaknesses, which is exactly why he puts in the work to overcome them. But Curry's routine serves another purpose – he's getting into the zone. The zone occurs when you are completely present and at the top of your game. For many of us, the zone is fleeting, or even accidental. But elite athletes like Curry know that reaching it on a regular basis means developing intense focus – and training your body through thousands of hours of practice. Of course, if you do the work the way Curry does the work, there's no guarantee you'll become as big of a star as he is. After all, nothing in life is guaranteed. There's no formula to becoming a drafted NBA player or champion. But if you do the work, whatever that work may be, not only will you become faster, stronger, and smarter – you'll also get the sense that you're onto something special. By pushing yourself, stowing your ego, committing to the team, building your mental strength, and taking care of yourself, you'll realize as Bosh realized that you are stepping ever closer to fulfilling your potential as a human being.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks is that: To achieve your full potential as an athlete you must value yourself, push past your limits, stow your ego, and develop your mind. You have to commit yourself to the team and find the motivation that sharpens you in the moment and sustains you over the long run. And here's some more actionable advice: Cultivate interests outside of the game. Take up an instrument, study dance, or even start cooking classes. It doesn't really matter what it is – pursuits outside of sport will develop your focus, memory, and creativity, all of which are mental strengths you'll need to play your game well. Beyond that, you might find connections you hadn't anticipated. For example, Bosh, a lifelong bookworm, says that visualizing the scenarios he read in

novels from Harry Potter to The Great Gatsby helped him to better visualize and execute complex plays on the court.