

LOOK BEYOND THE RESULT SHEET

What competition really tells us about talent development

Results tell us what happened. They don't always tell us what developed. What might we see if athletes, parents and coaches learned to look beyond the outcome?

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September 2026

A result is a starting point, not the whole story

I spent Sunday at the Northern Road Relays in Sunderland, watching athletes compete across age groups from U14 through to senior level.

At the end of the day, as in most competitive sport, we were left with a very clear record of what had happened: times, positions, medals and qualification. All important. All easy to measure.

But how much does a result actually tell us about the development of a young athlete?

Probably less than we sometimes think. A result tells us what happened at a particular moment in time. It does not necessarily tell us what developed. If we are genuinely interested in talent development rather than simply talent identification, that distinction matters.

The stories the results don't show

Looking at Sunday's results in isolation, you would see teams finishing in different positions, athletes recording different times and some returning home with medals. What you would not see is the context behind those performances.

- Young athletes experiencing this level of competition for the first time.
- Athletes moving into new age groups and encountering a different level of challenge.
- An 800m runner stepping considerably beyond their specialist distance to race 5.1km for their team.
- An athlete beginning to show signs of returning to previous form after a difficult 12 months.
- Athletes learning how to handle the intensity and responsibility of opening, chasing and anchor relay legs.
- Four U20 athletes, three aged only 17, stepping into a Senior Championship and finishing on the podium against senior opposition.
- A team missing qualification for the next round by a single place, while still producing important individual learning and first experiences.

The result sheet captures the outcome. It captures very little of the developmental story underneath it.

A more developmental way to use competition

RESULT → CONTEXT → LEARNING → NEXT EXPERIENCE

This is a more useful sequence than moving directly from result to judgement. Competition gives us evidence. We add context, identify what has been learned or exposed, and then decide what experience the athlete might need next.

What does this look like across different sports?

ATHLETICS Result: 4:45 for 1500m. 7th place.	LOOK BEYOND THE RESULT Pacing, response to being passed, tactical choices, willingness to stay engaged when uncomfortable, confidence on the start line, independence in preparation, or the significance of the performance after injury or illness.
HOCKEY Result: Lost 3-1.	LOOK BEYOND THE RESULT Scanning before receiving, recognising space, deciding when to play forward or retain possession, communication, response after losing the ball, transfer of learning from training, and whether the player can solve problems without looking to the sideline.
FOOTBALL Result: Won 2-0. No goal or assist.	LOOK BEYOND THE RESULT Positioning, receiving under pressure, recognising danger, off-ball decisions, adaptability against a quicker or stronger opponent, and whether the player is learning when not to take the obvious action.
SWIMMING Result: No personal best.	LOOK BEYOND THE RESULT Pacing, starts and turns, technical execution under fatigue, racing behaviour, and whether a technical change practised for weeks was successfully transferred into competition.
CYCLING / TRIATHLON Result: 16th place.	LOOK BEYOND THE RESULT Tactical decisions, pacing, fuelling, patience, responding to attacks or changes in conditions, and problem-solving when the original race plan stops working.

RUGBY Result: Lost 24-17. No try scored.	LOOK BEYOND THE RESULT Defensive positioning, support lines, communication, choices around carry/pass/kick, decision-making at the breakdown, and how the player adapts when facing physically more mature opponents. In youth rugby, current physical dominance and long-term development are not always the same thing.
CRICKET Result: 8 runs. No wickets.	LOOK BEYOND THE RESULT Decision quality against strong bowling, shot selection, building pressure, executing a bowling plan, fielding contribution, and response to dismissal or an unrewarded spell. A batter can make 8 and perform well; a bowler can take no wickets and execute brilliantly. Sometimes the better developmental performance produces the worse statistic.

The questions change from sport to sport. The developmental challenge underneath them is often remarkably similar.

The first question matters

A young athlete finishes racing or walks off the pitch and approaches a coach or parent. The first question they hear can carry more weight than we realise.

If our first question is always about the time, position, score or result, what might the young person gradually learn that we value?

There is nothing inherently wrong with asking about outcomes. Competitive sport involves outcomes. The issue is whether outcome becomes the only lens through which the performance is viewed.

Why do adults ask about the result first?

After competition, some of the most natural questions from parents are also the most outcome-focused:

- "What was the score?"
- "Did you win?"
- "What time did you get?"
- "Where did you finish?"
- "Did you score?"
- "Did you get picked for the next round?"
- "Who beat you?"
- "Why didn't you pass/shoot/go with them?"

These questions are usually not asked because parents are trying to create pressure. They are understandable. Results are visible, easy to understand and often the information parents have been conditioned by sport to notice first. Parents are invested too: they have watched, travelled, waited, worried and hoped. Asking for the outcome can be a way of showing interest, making sense of what happened, or trying to help.

The issue is not that parents care about results. It is what repeated result-first conversations can teach a young athlete about what matters most.

What might the athlete hear?

A parent may ask, "Did you win?" and simply mean, "Tell me about your day." But the athlete may hear something different - particularly if the same pattern is repeated after every competition.

PARENT ASKS	PARENT MAY MEAN	ATHLETE MAY HEAR
"Did you win?"	I'm interested. Tell me what happened.	Winning is the thing that makes this worthwhile.
"What time did you get?"	I know your time matters to you.	The number decides whether today was good or bad.
"Did you score?"	I want to know how you got on.	My contribution is measured by the obvious statistic.
"Where did you finish?"	Help me understand the race.	My value is relative to the people around me.
"Why didn't you pass/shoot/go with them?"	I'm trying to understand or help.	I made a mistake and need to explain myself immediately.

That does not mean every young athlete interprets every question this way. Age, personality, the parent-child relationship and the emotional importance of the event all matter. But repeated patterns of attention can shape what an athlete learns to pay attention to themselves.

If the first conversation after every performance centres on winning, selection, times, goals or mistakes, some athletes may begin to judge themselves through exactly those measures. A good day becomes a win, a PB or a goal. A bad day becomes everything else.

For some, that can make competition feel increasingly like an assessment rather than an opportunity to explore, compete and learn. It can also make the journey home feel like a second performance: first they compete, then they have to explain the competition.

The feeling can look different across sports

ATHLETICS Common question: "What time did you get? Where did you finish?"	What it can feel like: The athlete may quickly reduce a complex race to a number. Tactical progress, courage, pacing or returning from injury can disappear behind whether the clock showed a PB.
HOCKEY Common question: "Did you win? Did you score?"	What it can feel like: A player can begin to overlook scanning, decision-making, defensive work and off-ball contribution because the visible outcome becomes the main currency of a 'good game'.
FOOTBALL Common question: "Did you score? Did you start? How long did you play?"	What it can feel like: The athlete may feel that goals, selection and minutes are the measures that adults notice, even when their development is happening through positioning, decision-making or adapting to a difficult opponent.
SWIMMING Common question: "Did you PB?"	What it can feel like: Because the clock is so prominent, a technically excellent swim can feel like failure if the number is slower. The athlete may struggle to recognise progress that is not immediately rewarded by time.
CYCLING / TRIATHLON Common question: "Where did you finish? What was your time?"	What it can feel like: Course, conditions, tactics, fuelling and problem solving can vanish from the conversation. An athlete may judge the whole experience through placing rather than how effectively they managed it.
RUGBY Common question: "Did you win? Did you score a try? Did you start?"	What it can feel like: A player can start to equate value with selection, tries and visible physical impact. Quieter development, communication, support play, defensive reads, decision-making and finding solutions against bigger or stronger players can be missed.

CRICKET Common question: "How many runs did you get? Did you take any wickets?"	What it can feel like: Cricket's individual statistics can make a young player feel that a low score or wicketless spell equals failure. Yet the quality of decisions, execution, patience and response to failure may tell a much richer developmental story.
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Across sports, the language changes "What time did you get?" "Did you score?" "How many runs?" "Did you take any wickets?" "Did you win?" but the risk is similar: the most visible outcome can become the whole meaning of the experience.

The goal is not to ban result questions

Results are part of sport. Young athletes are allowed to care deeply about winning, times, selection and scoring. Parents can celebrate those things too. The aim is not to replace competitiveness with endless reflection.

The practical shift is in the order and breadth of the conversation: connect with the athlete first, let them tell you what mattered to them, and then explore the result in context.

CONNECT → LISTEN → REFLECT → THEN DISCUSS THE RESULT

That might mean the first question is simply, "How are you?" or "How did that feel?" Later, if the athlete wants to talk, the score, time or position can become part of a much richer conversation rather than the judgement that defines it.

Questions that open reflection

- How did that feel?
- What are you pleased with?
- What did you find difficult?
- Was there anything you worked out for yourself today?
- What did you do better than last time?
- What surprised you?
- If you could do it again tomorrow, what would you try differently?
- What did you learn about yourself today?

These questions do not make sport less competitive. They invite the athlete to become an active participant in understanding their own performance.

Three lenses around the developing athlete

ATHLETE	PARENT	COACH
• What did I experience? • What did I learn? • What challenged me? • What did I solve myself? • What would I try differently?	• What does my child need from me right now? • Do they want to talk yet? • Am I listening or analysing? • Am I asking because they need it - or because I want an explanation? • What does my reaction communicate?	• What did this experience reveal? • What emerged under pressure? • What remains fragile? • Did I intervene too much? • What experience does this athlete need next?

Parents don't need to become the coach

Parents naturally care about how their child performs. They experience the excitement, nerves, disappointment and pride alongside them. Supporting development, however, does not require a parent to provide a technical assessment immediately after every performance.

Sometimes the most valuable contribution is simpler: listen, give the young person time to process, allow them to decide whether they want to talk, and ask questions rather than immediately providing answers.

The coach can coach. The parent can provide something equally valuable: perspective, stability and support that is not dependent on what appears on the result sheet.

Coaches don't always need to provide the answer either

Coaches see things in competition that they immediately want to discuss. But if every performance is instantly analysed, corrected and explained for the athlete, we risk developing athletes who become dependent on adults to interpret their experiences.

We want athletes who can recognise problems, find solutions, understand their own performance and increasingly make decisions without somebody on the sideline telling them whether something was good or bad.

Independence is development too.

What did the environment ask of them?

Talent development cannot simply involve repeatedly placing young athletes into environments where they can demonstrate what they are already good at. Sometimes the most useful experience deliberately exposes something they cannot quite do yet.

- A longer distance.
- A stronger opponent.
- A different playing position.
- A more responsible role within a team.
- Older competition.
- A tactical problem they have not encountered before.
- A situation where the coach deliberately gives them less information.
- A competition where there is a genuine possibility they will not win.

The immediate performance might look worse. The developmental opportunity might be considerably better.

The danger of snapshots

Young athletes do not develop in straight lines. They mature at different rates, arrive with different sporting histories and have different opportunities. Yet competition continually presents us with snapshots: a race, a match, a tournament, a trial or a selection event.

Those moments provide valuable information, but problems arise when we confuse the snapshot with the trajectory.

- We can confuse winning with developing.
- We can confuse current performance with future potential.
- We can confuse physical maturity with greater talent.
- We can confuse a good result with a good developmental experience.
- We can confuse a difficult performance with regression.

Sometimes those things align. Sometimes they do not.

One result can mean two very different things

Two young athletes can produce exactly the same result and still be at very different points in their development.

Imagine two 14-year-olds both run 4:40 for 1500m. On the result sheet they are identical.

ATHLETE A	ATHLETE B
Five years in the sport; physically mature; four training sessions each week; extensive racing experience.	Twelve months in the sport; later maturing; two training sessions each week; still learning how to race.

The stopwatch says 4:40 and 4:40. A developmental interpretation asks a different set of questions: What has each athlete experienced? What resources and opportunities sit behind the performance? What is their trajectory? What are they ready for next?

Development is individual, so the meaning of performance is individual too.

Today's performance or tomorrow's performer?

We often evaluate young athletes on today's performance while saying that our aim is to develop the performer of tomorrow.

Those aims can align, but not always.

A coach can give an instruction that improves today's performance while removing an opportunity for the athlete to recognise and solve the problem independently.

A parent can solve today's disappointment or difficulty for their child while unintentionally reducing the space for reflection and ownership.

A talent programme can select the strongest performer today while still needing to remain curious about athletes whose developmental trajectory, maturation or experience is different.

Are we trying to improve today's performance, or develop the athlete's ability to perform tomorrow without us?

Often we need to do both. The important thing is being clear about which outcome our intervention is serving.

A challenge for coaches: what are we expecting to see?

Context should not become something we apply selectively. Coaches and selectors bring expectations into competition too, and those expectations can influence how we interpret exactly the same evidence.

If an athlete we already rate highly performs poorly, are we quicker to search for context? If an athlete we have previously overlooked performs exceptionally well, are we equally willing to reconsider our view?

Useful post-competition reflection therefore includes a question for the observer as well as the athlete:

Am I observing what happened, or looking for evidence that confirms what I already believed?

A practical approach after the next competition

The aim is not to turn every journey home into a debrief. It is to create enough space for the athlete to think, while giving parents and coaches a clearer role.

For parents: connect first, reflect later

- Immediately afterwards, start with the person rather than the performance: "How are you?" or "I loved watching you compete."
- Let the athlete decide whether they want to talk straight away. Silence in the car is not a missed coaching opportunity.
- If they do want to reflect, ask before offering your analysis: "What did you think?"
- Leave technical coaching to the coach unless there is a clear reason not to. Your role can be different and equally important.
- Remember that your own emotions are real too. The challenge is not to make the young athlete responsible for managing them.

For athletes: separate the outcome from the performance

- What could I control today, and what was outside my control?
- What decision or action am I most pleased with?
- Where did I need help?
- What did I recognise for myself?
- What would I notice earlier next time?
- What is one thing I want to carry into my next training session or competition?

For coaches: review before you prescribe

- What did competition reveal that training could not?
- What did the athlete recognise before I said anything?
- Where did I intervene and was that intervention necessary?
- What did the athlete do when the plan stopped working?
- Am I interpreting this performance consistently with how I would interpret another athlete's?
- What is the smallest useful next challenge rather than simply more of the same?

ATHLETE	PARENT	COACH
What am I pleased with?	What does my child need now?	What did competition reveal?
What challenged me?	Have I listened first?	What did the athlete notice?
What did I solve myself?	Am I reacting to the result?	Did I help too quickly?
What would I change?	Can the analysis wait?	What bias might I bring?
What do I need next?	What can I leave to athlete and coach?	What experience should come next?

Don't rush from RESULT → JUDGEMENT.

RESULT → CONTEXT → LEARNING → NEXT EXPERIENCE.

When should we actually focus on the result?

Looking beyond the result does not mean pretending the result does not matter. Competitive sport needs consequence. Young athletes are allowed to want to win, chase a personal best, earn selection, score, take wickets, make the team or beat an opponent.

Disappointment is part of that experience too. The developmental challenge is not to remove the importance of the outcome, but to help the athlete place it in proportion.

The result can be important without becoming the athlete's identity.

Development is not the opposite of performance

A young athlete saying, "I really wanted to win and I'm disappointed that I didn't" is not a problem that needs to be fixed immediately. Caring about the outcome is part of learning to compete.

What matters is whether the athlete can eventually separate an outcome from a judgement about themselves:

- "I lost today" is different from "I'm not good enough."
- "I wasn't selected" is an outcome, not automatically a judgement about long-term potential.
- "I didn't PB" does not mean nothing improved.
- "I made a mistake" is different from "I am a failure."

How much weight should this result carry?

Results should not carry identical meaning at every stage of development. A young athlete's current performance can be shaped by maturation, training age, previous opportunity, experience, role, opposition and the environment around them.

As athletes develop and the context becomes more stable, performance standards understandably become increasingly important. The question is therefore not simply whether results matter, but:

How much weight should this result carry, for this athlete, at this stage of their development?

Don't rescue the disappointment

When a young athlete loses, is not selected, makes a mistake or performs below their expectations, adults naturally want to make them feel better. That can lead us to explain the disappointment away:

- "Don't worry about it."
- "It doesn't matter."
- "The referee was terrible."
- "You were still the best player."
- "You were tired."
- "The conditions were awful."

Sometimes those explanations may even be true. But moving too quickly to reassurance can unintentionally tell the athlete that disappointment is something to escape rather than an emotion they can experience, understand and move through.

ACKNOWLEDGE	"I can see you're disappointed." Recognise the emotion without immediately trying to change it.
ALLOW	They do not have to feel better straight away. Give the emotion some space.
EXPLORE	When they are ready: "What do you think happened?" Let the athlete begin the interpretation.
LEARN	"Is there anything you want to take from it?" Turn the experience towards what comes next.

Care deeply, without being defined by the outcome

Perhaps the aim is not to develop young athletes who stop caring whether they win or lose. It is to help them become competitors who can care deeply about the outcome, experience genuine disappointment when it does not go their way, and still retain enough perspective to examine the performance, learn and return.

Care about the result. Learn from the result. Don't let the result define you.

Development doesn't always look like winning

Competitive results matter. They should matter. Sport without competition loses something important. But particularly when working with young people, results need context.

Sometimes development looks like winning.

Sometimes it looks like being stretched.

Sometimes it looks like struggling.

Sometimes it looks like making a mistake and finding the solution.

Sometimes it looks like being trusted with greater responsibility.

Sometimes it looks like competing against someone better than you.

Sometimes it is a performance that means very little to everyone reading the results sheet but represents a significant step forward to the athlete, parent and coach who understand the journey behind it.

The question isn't only: 'How did they perform?'

It is: 'What did this performance teach us and what experience do they need next?'

RESULT → CONTEXT → LEARNING → NEXT EXPERIENCE