PRINCIPLE 6

Make Friends with Failure

My motto was always to keep swinging. Whether I was in a slump or feeling badly or having trouble off the field, the only thing to do was keep swinging.

Hank Aaron
Legendary home run–hitting king

Defeated. Crushed. Routed. Beaten. No matter how you describe it, failure isn't pleasant. But I like what the wise preacher once said: "Folks, I've read the end of the Book, and we win!"

You have probably noticed that our culture leaves little room for failure. The victory circle makes the front page, but newspapers rarely highlight those who come in second or third. Even rarer would be a feature article about someone who came in fifth or sixth, even if that person had the potential to get the job done better the next time around.

Clients often share with me the anxiety, fear, and worry they have about failing. They dread failure at work, in relationships, in financial ventures, and in athletics. The anticipation of loss can be quite difficult—even paralyzing. Have you ever met a healthy person who enjoyed failing? I haven't.

Of the many factors tempting people to compromise integrity, fear of failure is high on the list. The measure of success is always

based on what people do right—not what they do wrong. But in every competition or corporate setting where successful performances are measured by averages and percentages, failure occurs. Batters with a .300 average have failed 70 percent of the time. (For the mathematically challenged, think of a batting average as the number of times a person hits a ball out of ten times at bat. An average of .300 means the batter hit three out of ten pitches.) At first glance, success may even look like failure.

At the beginning of the 2007 MLB season, Hank Aaron still was the all-time home run hitter with 755 lifetime dingers. Over twenty-three seasons, Aaron hit a highly regarded career average of .305. But for all his success at the plate, Hammerin' Hank had his share of failures. He struck out 1,383 times in his career. That's at least 4,149 pitches thrown to him that he failed to hit—not necessarily counting foul balls! Other legendary hitters such as Reggie Jackson, Manny Ramirez, and Dwight Evans haven't even done that well, striking out more than Aaron. Yet no one considers any of those men failures.

A Dangerous Formula

In chapter 3, we discussed the differences between outcome goals and performance goals. Remember, outcome goals are simply the final score—just a bunch of numbers when the game is over. Too many competitors allow self-worth and self-concept to be intertwined with outcome goals. You can imagine what it would be like if you always determined your value on whether you won or lost. If you lost frequently, you'd feel miserable about yourself.

Brandi was an outstanding tennis player. She had been recruited to play at a Division I school on a scholarship that would fund a

degree in veterinary medicine. She was smart, both in the classroom and on the court. Her confidence was bolstered by her high school achievements—making the honor roll and remaining undefeated in tennis.

Once she got to college, however, things changed. From the outside, Brandi looked like any other struggling freshman who was adjusting to a career as a college athlete. But, on the inside, she *thought* she was failing. Brandi's course work required hours of rigorous study, which always overlapped with her practice and training schedules. She won six matches, but for some reason her backhand was not as accurate as it had been in high school, and her timing for drop shots wasn't there.

> ***Show me a guy who's afraid to look bad, and I'll show you a guy you can beat every time.***
>
> Lou Brock
> Famed St. Louis Cardinal

Brandi dangerously measured her self-worth based on outcome goals. She aimed for an undefeated record on the court and a perfect grade point average to achieve personal satisfaction. When she didn't reach those goals, Brandi felt she had failed. She had never learned to effectively deal with failing.

Many people working in competitive settings today are guided by the same useless self-worth formula as Brandi. They allow failure to dictate dissatisfaction in their lives and, for that reason, they are more likely to compromise integrity.

Rather than being determined by a win-loss record, our integrity needs to be commingled with our love of the game, the spirit of competition, and relationships with teammates.

The Failure Mind-set

Researchers at Cornell University and the University of Toledo double-teamed on the same research project, confirming that our thinking has much to do with how we perceive winning and losing. Published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, the research took a look at silver and bronze Olympic medalists and how happy they felt about their individual performances. Traditionally, as the article suggests, our culture tends to believe the better we perform, the better we feel about ourselves. But according to this study, that isn't the case all of the time.

Surprisingly, the bronze medal winners were happier than the silver medalists. Researchers found that *thinking* determined the level of happiness athletes experienced. Silver medalists were probably thinking about how they had missed the gold medal and the subsequent celebration and fame that would have accompanied it. The bronze medalists, on the other hand, were actually happier even though they performed worse than the silver medalists. The bronze medalists' thoughts were assumed to be focused on something more positive, like being on the medal stand, the honor of earning a medal for their country, or how disappointing it would have been to have missed out on a medal altogether. Remember this when you think about your own ways of dealing with failure, losing, and defeat. Failure is a mind-set that you can control.

Imagine a fight scene from an old Western movie where one dusty, Remington-toting cowboy says to another, "I'm going to give you one shot, so you'd better make 'er count." If the good guy gets the first shot, we're rooting for him to give it his best. We know that if he aims halfheartedly, he may be in trouble.

Competing in sports and business is no different. Halfhearted shots at success will get you halfhearted results at best. You either give it your best or you'll be facing trouble soon. You either commit to do a job well or you'll regret the consequences later. Figure skaters must be fully committed to a double lutz or they hit the ice. Ski jumpers must be committed to their stunts or face a potentially fatal crash. Sales professionals must provide stellar customer service or business will plummet. Making the decision to compete with all you've got and accept the consequences, either positive or negative, is a first-class approach.

Some competitors try to minimize a crisis before it even happens. They take only a minimal risk, hoping they can deal with minimal failure. By contrast, when you fully commit to competition, you can free yourself from the fear that holds back your performance. You can't control the outcome, but you can control your effort. Therefore, you should commit to competing at your highest level rather than committing to winning.

If you give it all you've got and still fail, you haven't lost everything. If your attempt is done honorably, you still possess courage, self-respect, and an opportunity to try again. Those are traits many competitors will never achieve.

Give Yourself Permission to Fail

Once you've committed to competing, neutralize any remaining fear of failure by actually giving yourself permission to fail. One client athlete I worked with told me he intended to win first place in his division and would accept nothing less. He didn't seem very confident, however. I think his bold declaration was his attempt to deal with failure, believing that somehow bravado would make

him a fearless champion. Maybe he was going to deny that failure could occur at all. That's one strategy, but it's not very reality-based. Regardless, his proclamation backed him into a corner, and his anxiety increased. When that happens, there's very little one can do to reduce worry about a possible loss.

Clients frequently ask me what they should do about a performance problem. Maybe they make errors in games, become flooded with negative thoughts, or can't concentrate. Usually, they have already discussed the problem with teammates, coworkers, or some other trusted person and are now ready to physically do something about their problem.

Behind the cloud the sun is still shining.

Abraham Lincoln
Sixteenth U.S. president

On occasion, I have asked an athlete to compete in a particular event with the specific objective of failing. You probably think that I've gone off the deep end. But my goal is to cause the athlete to see that fear of failure isn't nearly as strong as he or she first thought.

When Zoe was a senior exchange student in France, she played soccer competitively for the first time. She realized that it was a great way to become involved in the culture and develop a social network. Her hidden natural ability developed quickly. Because she had a true affinity for the game, she regretted that she hadn't started playing soccer when she was younger.

Zoe was accepted at a Division II university and planned to pursue a degree in elementary education. She also tried out for the women's soccer team. Even with her unyielding hustle and consistent scoring, which was continually improved by constructive feed-

back from her coach during her practices and games, Zoe still was terrified that her lack of experience with the game would be exposed. Zoe's obsessive thoughts forced her to train harder and longer than her teammates, and she quickly became exhausted.

After we made a thorough assessment and built a good working alliance, Zoe and I decided to test out her fear of failing. Was it as bad as she thought? We knew that her team was going to have a low-risk scrimmage game later in the week. I asked Zoe to deliberately miss a goal and intentionally perform poorly for the first twenty minutes of the game. She agreed to try the strategy without her teammates' knowledge. After the scrimmage, Zoe reported to me that she felt a sense of relief about failing because once she purposely caused it to happen, she saw how far she really was from failing. Failing in the terrible way she had always imagined was hard work—maybe nearly impossible. She laughed at her coach's description of her performance: "slow to warm up, but no big deal." Zoe actually found it challenging to perform poorly. Her ability to control failure to a greater degree gave her confidence she hadn't had before.

Block Out and Rebound

Once or twice a year, a colleague invites me to lecture in his senior psychology seminar at Harvard. In my most recent visit to the Sever Hall classroom, the crew of students was particularly interested in sport psychology. This collection of seniors included a soccer player, a hockey player, more than a couple of swimmers, and even an equestrian. We discussed a couple of clinical examples of sport psychology cases and then ventured into a discussion about performance enhancement techniques.

When it came to mental tricks and strategies, these student-athletes willingly shared what worked for them and what didn't. As our discussion progressed, we talked about the less traditional enhancement strategy of practicing errors and recovering when a performance goes wrong. Borrowing basketball terminology of "blocking out" and "rebounding," everyone agreed that good competitors know how to block out thoughts of failure and rebound after a failed performance. After failing, a good competitor must block out any negative thoughts or ruminations about the failure and then rebound by being ready to perform again immediately. In order to block out a thought, it has to be there first—but just for a moment. If you let it linger, it will start distracting you from your next performance. If you're paying attention to your game, you'll know you've made a mistake. However, a competitor's effectiveness declines when he or she stays in that negative moment, replaying an error, failure, or snafu over and over. That competitor never rebounds.

Blocking out a negative thought about failure could include various strategies, but I usually suggest my clients rebound by immediately refocusing on the next task at hand. You can use self-talk, which we discussed in chapter 4, as a constructive strategy. Self-talk can be used in a matter of seconds to block out a negative thought and refocus your attention so you can rebound. You might say something like: *Okay, so I messed up. I don't need to dwell on it. I need to refocus on the task at hand right now. Let's go.*

Visual imagery, which we'll discuss a bit later, can be another practical strategy for rebounding. You can imagine yourself making the next play successfully or the bad play that just happened being blown away in the wind—gone forever. The bottom line is this: Stop

the negative thought related to failure and immediately refocus on the next opportunity you have to succeed.

Although it felt counterintuitive, when I played baseball, practicing errors and recovering from them was helpful to the team. When I coached youth baseball later in life, it made even more sense to practice dealing with the inevitability of failure. Rest assured that your competition will be practicing the fundamentals of your game, but they may not be well practiced in letting go of errors, failure, mistakes, or other performance blunders. This is another way you can gain strength over failure and develop a competitive edge. If you practice rebounding from failure, you'll have more confidence to overcome it when it happens.

Say Good-bye to Square One

Frequently I work with clients who have put considerable energy into reaching goals. They've spent long hours at the gym or on the field. They've read countless books about strategy and technique. Many people strive to be something different or do something new. And—almost predictably—on their first try, they fail. "I'm back to square one, aren't I?" they ask me. In the midst of all of their hard work, it could be tempting to give up, thinking no progress had been made at all. But I always tell them the answer is no—no one returns to square one.

Square one is an old neighborhood that can't be revisited—even if we try. It's actually the point where the decision to work on goals and competition is made. From that point forward, an athlete can invest hours in physical exercise, psychological skills training, or other strategies to improve performance. But it's important to note that all of the activities following the point of decision making were

not included in square one. They were new ideas, additional training, and improved skill that occurred *after* the decision was made to pursue them. Therefore, by thinking we've gone back to square one, we discount—even eliminate—all of the work that's been put toward achieving the goal. The past doesn't equal the future.

I met Nikki, a runner from California, in the medical tent at the Boston Marathon. She, along with her husband and son, had come to Boston four days prior to the marathon to enjoy some family time and get acclimated to a different time zone. Her husband was a dedicated runner with more than fifty marathons under his belt. As a result of an unfortunate ankle injury three years prior, he no longer was able to run any long distances. Nikki decided she wanted to run for her husband. She had been on the sidelines for many years encouraging him and now wanted to start her own running career.

Nikki, like many marathoners, was driven and obsessive. She came to the medical tent late in the day after crossing the finish line. From behind tears of anger, she said she could describe her problem in two words—Heartbreak Hill. Heartbreak Hill is a legendary segment of the Boston Marathon course between miles twenty and twenty-one that ascends a grueling half mile. It's during this stretch that many runners hit the wall, when they feel as if all energy to keep going is lost. Nikki described how she had struggled to run up Heartbreak Hill. She reached the summit and saw the buildings of downtown Boston in the distance. Even with most of the course behind her and the finish within five miles, Nikki didn't have the strength to continue.

She walked most of the way from that point, jogging when she could. Her dedication to finish demonstrated she wasn't a quitter. She eventually jogged across the finish line on Boylston Street, but had bloody blisters on her feet, was dehydrated, and had a bruised

ego. As a podiatrist attended to her feet, Nikki told me she was angry that she didn't finish as strong as she had wanted. She thought her training was in vain and that the expense for her family to be in Boston was too much of a financial sacrifice.

"Basically," Nikki said, "I'm back to square one. All of my effort has been for nothing."

Nikki, as you can probably tell, overlooked some important factors that weren't part of square one—that actual moment she decided to try to qualify for the Boston Marathon. Square one didn't include finishing the marathon, and she now had a medal hanging around her neck that proved she had finished. Square one didn't include the new friendships that had developed in her training groups on the West Coast. Square one didn't include the family time spent in Boston, nor the experience of having her family work as a team on her behalf. Square one didn't include the pride that her husband had knowing that she was running on his behalf. Yes, not reaching goals can be incredibly disappointing, but you never go back to square one if you fail.

Find the Common Denominator

Do you remember who won the Major League Baseball World Series in 2002? The Anaheim Angels. Who won the NCAA men's basketball playoffs in 2003? If you thought Syracuse, you're right. Let's try this one. Who won the Stanley Cup in 1997 and 1998? I'll give you a clue—it was the same team that won in 2002. If you guessed the Detroit Red Wings, you scored! But now, can you name any team that placed second to these first-place finishers? If you can, you're probably ahead of most people in the sports trivia game. If you couldn't pull up any names at all, join the stadiums and arenas full of fans

who get excited in the moment of victory but don't remember the champions or the losers later on.

The common denominator winning and losing share is that both have a temporary nature. When I was a young pitcher, my father would remind me after a good outing that the next game I pitched would require all of the elements that my current success just had. A good performance would need to be done all over again. He was right. It was that same philosophy that helped my mental game when my pitching was poor. I knew I would have another opportunity to play again, and that this poor performance would pass by me. Either way you look at it, winning and losing are temporary. It's for this very reason that we shouldn't prolong any misery that accompanies failure in competition. It will be over soon enough.

Planning to Fail Takes Energy

Sometimes success or failure is decided before the competition even begins. If negative predictions abound, before you know it, you'll be telling yourself that you shouldn't even try. In your mind, you've lost the competition before you ever put on a uniform.

Prior to the Red Sox World Series win in 2004, I received a few media calls from reporters who wanted interviews with a psychologist who could talk about how sports fans deal with intense emotions and whether the curse of the Bambino was real or in fans' heads.

One interview with ESPN was supposed to focus on how Boston fans dealt with losing—to the Yankees—year after year. This media request came after Boston was behind New York by three games in the American League Championship Series. The winner would eventually play St. Louis in the World Series. It was time to play Game Four, and Boston needed to win it to stay alive.

I agreed to talk about the emotions of winning and losing in competition, but I did not want to speak about how miserable life is without a pennant—again. I was also a little unsure about talking about the outcome of a game before it was played. I'm sure the producer needed to plan ahead. But I had personally invested some late nights watching the play-offs—many of my clients had as well. None of us were ready to throw in the towel. The producer said he would call me after the game to arrange the details of the interview for the next morning.

The Red Sox beat the Yankees 6–4 in twelve innings at Fenway Park, and the game ended well after midnight. My phone didn't ring, so I called the producer of the segment who said plans had dramatically changed now that the Red Sox won. The crew that was to cover the live interview at Fenway was now headed back to New York. As in most cases with the media, the moment of excitement carries the news. I didn't hear from ESPN anymore—until the day of Game Seven, the big game between the Red Sox and the Yankees.

Game Seven would decide who would be going to the World Series. The producer called early that morning and asked again if I would be available to talk about how Boston fans would be dealing with the loss if they lost such a close series. Again, I agreed to talk about losing in sport and joked about the hard work that was going into today's story—the same story that backfired three games ago. The producer, a big baseball fan himself, said they would call again after the game. Sometime during the early afternoon, the phone rang. It was the producer again, wanting to know if I would do the interview about losing even if the *Yankees* lost.

The Red Sox won Game Seven and registered one of the greatest comebacks in sports history. This story serves as a perfect example

of how predicting failure can exhaust mental energy for no reason at all. I realize a television network must plan for its responses, but for competitors, thinking about failing is inefficient and a waste of time.

We can avoid negative predictions about failure by focusing on what is happening in the present moment and the potential positive outcome that could happen if we perform at our best.

Failure Loves Company—And So Do We

You're in good company if you fail. Just consider the impressive lineup of failures. As a high school sophomore, Michael Jordan did not make the cut for his North Carolina varsity basketball team. Twelve publishing houses rejected the manuscript for J. K. Rowling's first Harry Potter book before it was eventually accepted. Prior to his success, entrepreneur Sam Walton was told by his boss at JCPenney that he didn't have what it took to be in retail. Harry Truman went to sleep thinking that he had lost a presidential election, but woke the next morning to find an unexpected trip to Washington DC on his schedule. One, two, three, or even more failures don't define who you are. Failure is going to happen to even the best of the best, so accept that as one of the rules of success.

Alex Nisetich was rejected by Columbia College his senior year in high school. Along with many of his classmates, Alex posted his college rejection letters on the Wall of Shame for everyone to see. The Wall of Shame is a centrally-located bulletin board where Lincoln-Sudbury High School seniors traditionally and openly share their college rejections with everyone. Students post their numerous rejection letters from colleges and universities so they can share in the failure process together.

"Dealing with failure publicly gives us strength and solidarity.

Posting our rejection letters also lets us feel normal," described Alex, a Tufts University–bound rugby player. Again, if you fail, you're in good company.

Alex took dealing with failure to new heights by writing a rejection letter to one of the schools that rejected him. His boldness and humor made him a star among peers and faculty. Portions of his letter even made a local newspaper. He's given me the entire letter to share with you:

March 31, 2006

Columbia College
Office of Undergraduate Admissions
212 Hamilton Hall
1130 Amsterdam Avenue
New York, NY 10027

Dear Columbia College:
I most regretfully inform you that Alexander Nisetich, myself, is unable to grace Columbia's Class of 2010 with his presence. This year Mr. Nisetich applied to nearly ten schools, and, largely due to the fact that he had never applied to college before, experienced the most difficult selection process in the history of his life. The appeal of all colleges he applied to was undeniable, but unfortunately he cannot attend them all, causing him to disappoint more than a few prestigious universities.

I would like you to know that my decision is not a reflection of my lack of confidence in your ability to accept me and succeed as a university. My experience is that most of the colleges that do not accept me

are not entirely discredited, and I am confident that you will be okay even though I cannot offer myself to your class. Please understand that I cannot reconsider my decision; your rejection is final and eternal.

I appreciate your interest in Alexander Nisetich, or disinterest as it were, send my condolences, and wish you luck in finding other students.

Sincerely,
Alexander Nisetich
Executive Director
My Own Body

Get to Know Your Newest Teammate

Failure is something we are supposed to work against, not build an alliance with. Right? But what if you thought of failure as a teammate? How could that change your perspective?

As we look at the reality of competing, we can't ignore the fact that failure is a factor we must deal with. Wouldn't it make sense to know everything we could about failure and accept it for what it is?

Proverbs 27:17 says that "iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another." Simply put, one person can make another person better, and in the same way, failure can sharpen us if we are willing to interact with it.

Successful athletes know the importance of working well with their teammates. Remember the cliché: Your team is only as strong as its weakest member. Failure is anything but weak, and it should be considered a suitable, respected member of your team.

Let's really put a spin on this notion. If failure were an *actual person* on your team, what would you want to know about him in

order to deal with him effectively? Wouldn't you want to get the best out of him? Let's create a personality profile for Failure, your newest teammate, to see whether he gives you a competitive edge.

Failure is patient

Failure stays around until the competition is over. He never takes a time-out, never loafs, never runs to the concession stand, and never arrives late. He's patient and can wait out any extra innings, double-overtime, or extra periods. Just think of those many last-second plays you've seen that won the game—Failure was there. He's tolerant and can wait for you to make a mistake, or for your opponent to take control.

So what can Failure's patience teach you about winning? Failure models endurance and persistence. As a teammate, he can remind you to avoid being overconfident, to be well prepared, to never give up, and to play hard until the game is completely over. These qualities undeniably characterize winners.

Failure is encouraging

What? Failure is encouraging? You bet. Failure compels you to do your best when you compete. If you're poorly prepared and ill-equipped to compete, it's not Failure's fault; it's yours. Before you think this psychologist is clueless, let me first agree with you that Failure won't encourage you like your coach, fans, or family will. But simply by his presence in competition, Failure suggests that you have the potential to win. As competitors, sometimes the only thing we need to boost our confidence is to hear that someone else believes we've got what it takes to win. Therefore, Failure confirms for you

that you can get the job done when you compete—and that can help you think like a winner.

Failure is dependable

Each time you show up to compete, Failure will dependably stand by your side. He's there to remind you to be ready to perform any time you are called upon. He keeps everyone honest about achievement, too.

A good litmus test for whether a competition is legitimate is to determine whether your performance could have ended in failure. Remember, if you can't possibly fail, then you're probably not competing.

Many professions are associated with a scam called a vanity board. A vanity board is an entity that takes the shape of a generic-sounding organization. It entices individuals to bear the organization's credential or certification. A vanity board's pitch is that you'll be better able to compete against others in your field if you are branded by it. Of course a vanity board charges a substantial fee for reviewing your current credentials, but it's highly unlikely that you will fail the review process.

When you compete, you want Failure by your side. You want him to be there to legitimize your victory.

Failure is resilient

The concept of winning and losing has been around forever. It should be no surprise that once you're retired from playing on your team, Failure will still be around to play more seasons. Failure's resilience should remind you that losing is part of the natural ebb and flow of competition. Losing happens to all competitors in their careers.

It's like another old phrase, "Where there's smoke, there's fire." Well, where there's success, there's going to be failure, so the sooner you learn to deal with failure, the better prepared you'll be to compete. There's no reason that failure should continue to be a threat to you or your performance.

Make Friends with Failure

On her flight from France, Camille thought about every mile of the Boston Marathon. She had a life goal of completing marathons in each of the countries where her three siblings lived: England, Scotland, and the United States. Unlike her first attempt at running Boston years ago, this time she was determined to finish. Almost every mile was familiar to her because she had run them before—at least those prior to Heartbreak Hill. Like so many runners, Camille hit a wall and couldn't go on.

Although Camille failed in her first attempt, she didn't quit reaching for her goal. During the three years that had passed, Camille completed the London and Edinburgh marathons. She knew that she could go the distance. It was Heartbreak Hill in Boston that was the nemesis. As she prepared, she gave herself permission to fly to the United States as many times as necessary until she completed the race. She also recalled the topography of Heartbreak Hill and searched out additional details from a running club in Boston so she could find a similar course to practice. She made the effort to run up her own *Douloureux Colline* at least once weekly, focusing on the things that had caused her to fail during her last marathon in the United States.

Camille didn't shy away from failure. She actually embraced it, developing practice strategies based on the weaknesses in her

previous performance. And at the end of the race, Camille's family who had traveled from New York watched and cheered her on as she crossed the finish line. Failure had given Camille the information and knowledge she needed to win.

Former St. Louis Cardinal standout Lou Brock said, "Show me a guy who's afraid to look bad, and I'll show you a guy you can beat every time." His quote reveals the power that failure can have over us. But once we make friends with failure, we're better positioned to improve our skills and learn our physical, emotional, and spiritual capabilities. The last three verses of Proverbs 15 offer insight into what can happen when we partner with failure for our own good.

> *He who listens to a life-giving rebuke will be at home among the wise. He who ignores discipline despises himself, but whoever heeds correction gains understanding. The fear of the* LORD *teaches a man wisdom, and humility comes before honor.*
>
> Proverbs 15:31-33

POSTGAME REVIEW

- Remember that failing doesn't mean you're a complete failure.
- Decide which goals you are willing to commit to fully, casting the fear of failure aside.
- Relieve anxiety by giving yourself permission to fail.
- Block out negative thoughts and rebound so you can be better prepared to perform again.
- Focus on performing in the present moment, not failing in the future.
- Ponder the qualities of failure and how they confirm you are a worthy competitor.