

Exercise Success



While illness places limits on athletic competition, success should truly be measured by doing the best we can with what we have.

By Matthew D. Hansen, DPT, MPT, BSPTS

Competition, to varying degrees, is an innate drive that is found in all of us. As we age and mature, many of us learn to control the drive appropriately, so that for the benefit of society, as well as our own sanity, not everything becomes a competition. For instance, I don't grab for the last dinner roll or piece of pizza, pushing my children's and wife's hands aside as I used to do with my teenage brothers. It wouldn't do me much good if I did; at the very least, I could count dessert as a forgone possibility.

In some arenas of life, however, including athletics, structured competition can be beneficial to our personal progress and well-being. Competition drives us to perform and can boost self-confidence and bring us a sense of accomplishment. Many patients with a primary immunodeficiency (PI) or autoimmune disease may have considered athletic competition to be an integral part of their lifestyle prior to diagnosis, and now feel discouraged thinking that they may never be able to compete again.

Defining Success

Before presenting any suggestions or resources for participating in athletic competition, I ask you to indulge me in a moment of personal philosophy. Life is a competition of endurance, made up of individual battles, not so much with outside opponents as with our own expectations of ourselves. Worthy opponents frequently extend our own tape measures of success, albeit sometimes equivocally, but true success is a matter of perspective. When everything is said and done in life, I believe that our success will be measured by whether or not we did the very best we could with what we had. Not many people are born with perfect health or a 170 IQ, but we're all blessed with various attributes that can be used to better ourselves and the world around us.

I was a pretty good basketball player by most standards, but my dad told me that there would always be someone, somewhere, who was bigger, stronger and more naturally talented than I was. "The important thing," he would say, "is that you always give your best effort, and that even when you lose, you're not left beaten." We all have "losses," but we can't allow them to beat us. I still enjoy playing basketball. Although I'm no longer able to play at the same competitive level that I once did due to the natural effects that time takes on the body, I still do my best. The difference is that I no longer measure my success by the competition (I can't, because I'm not quick enough to keep up with many young high school players who I

would have easily bested in my prime). Instead, I measure my success by my effort and what I know I am capable of doing; I've also adapted my game to become a better outside shooter instead of driving to the basket as much as I used to.

I understand that some patients reading this article are thinking, "I wish that I could play basketball at all," but the principle is the same. Success should take into consideration our current abilities and our best efforts. The famous sports broadcaster, Howard Cosell, stated, "Ultimate victory in competition is derived from the inner satisfaction of knowing that you have done your best and that you have gotten the most out of what you had to give." My sentiments exactly. Now, it's time to offer some encouraging news.

*I believe that our success
will be measured by
whether or not we did the
very best we could with
what we had.*

Competing with One's Best

Some patients living with a PI or autoimmune disease may still be capable of competing in recreational athletics if care is taken not to exhaust the immune system by over-training. Days of running half marathons may be over (don't be too discouraged, most people never see those days), but a 5K or 10K race may be very achievable. The key is progressive training and understanding that there may be some minor setbacks along the way. Physical therapists and/or athletic trainers can help to develop a flexible, personalized training program. Just be sure they understand the diagnosis! Patients aren't looking for a boot camp instructor. Whatever activities patients are training for (e.g., jogging, biking, walking, swimming, tennis), progress should be gradual. For example, if they were typically able to jog for seven minutes without exhausting themselves or their immune system, they may want to try jogging for seven-and-a-half minutes the next time. If they do too much, their body will let them know.

They shouldn't get discouraged; they've just set a new goal to work toward.

Patients should be encouraged to find joy in the journey and not to make the race itself the end-all and only measure of success. Too many people with a PI have trained for months, only to have their plans for a big race crushed by a late respiratory infection. Others have started the race, only to discover that they aren't able to finish. We all "finish" what we are doing; the question is how we finish. The effort that we give is sometimes more important than where we end up. Who is to say that the person who finished their race on a given day by running to the

Patients should be encouraged to find joy in the journey and not to make the race itself the end-all and only measure of success.

10th oak tree on the left wasn't more successful than the Ironman who finished at the tape line after running a "lazy" race with an average time of seven minutes per mile?! Even if we had set out for the tape line, goals change. I wanted to be an NBA basketball player more than anything in the world (my tape line), but that goal changed. It doesn't matter whether it was because I physically couldn't reach the line or because my priorities in life changed, because I'm the best physical therapist that I can be and very happy about it. The same determination and adaptability that helped me to become a great basketball player helped me to become a great physical therapist.

Where to Compete

There are quite a few groups that exist to help people with different physical ailments and/or disabilities to participate in organized sport. It's not too difficult to find a local adaptive basketball wheelchair league or amputee swimming team. Unfortunately, it's much more difficult to

find organizations that focus on less visible diagnoses such as a PI. One resource is the National Center on Health, Physical Activity and Disability, whose website, www.ncpad.org, has a state-by-state directory of different programs, organizations and even personal trainers who "self-report their experience and qualifications in working with clients with disabilities and health conditions."

Another great organization is Disabled Sports USA. The non-profit's goal is to "improve the lives of wounded warriors, youth and adults with disabilities by providing sports and recreation opportunities." Its website, www.disabledsportsusa.org, has a directory of local chapters throughout the U.S. Again, many of these chapters have a focus on some of the more visible physical disabilities; however, some of them have also done work with athletes who live with multiple sclerosis and several other autoimmune or PI conditions.

One of the most unique methods for patients to remain physically competitive is through home technology. Several video game consoles (e.g., Nintendo Wii, Microsoft Xbox 360 and Sony PlayStation 3) now have interactive components that allow the player to participate/compete in a number of athletic and adventure games through motion-controlled, active play. The consoles can detect the physical movements of a person standing in front of the television screen, and move the figure on the video game accordingly. In this manner, players can enjoy competing from the comfort and safety of their own home or other controlled environment. I've participated with patients in virtual track and field events, boxing, basketball, bowling and even Star Wars light saber duels.

The greatest thing about using the optional Internet feature with a video game console is that you can play against people with similar skill levels from anywhere in the world while using an alias for your computer figure. The other players have no way of knowing who you are, and you don't know who they are. Your worthy opponent could be the real Muhammad Ali playing from his home in the U.S., or it could be a 7-year-old girl in Beijing, China. Video games can be used to help train for outside events or used as competition themselves. If you get tired, simply end the game. Just don't pull the cord out of the wall when others are still playing; my brother used to do that when he was losing, and it drove me crazy!

For patients who don't feel they need to be competing against other people, the possibilities for personal competition are endless. I've set a lot of little goals for myself throughout the years and tried to reach beyond the mark



(e.g., seeing how high I could climb a mountain near our home, how many push-ups I could do in a row, how long I could run without stopping). I recommend that patients set the same type of goals, with one additional suggestion: They shouldn't push too hard to beat the mark each time that they compete. They should set their own baseline (e.g., I'm going to climb at least one set of stairs, because I know that I can usually do that easily). If they don't feel up to the baseline, they probably shouldn't be exercising that day. If they do choose to exercise and at least meet the baseline, that's a "win." As patients become more consistent with meeting the baseline, gradually advancing that baseline as they are able, they will see the mark advance as well (it's OK for the baseline to move forward or backward as needed). Patients can keep a log of their accomplishments — not just of the new records, but more importantly, of how many times they are able to meet the baseline.

Life Is a Competition

Life is a competition of endurance, made up of individual battles, not so much with outside opponents as with our own expectations of ourselves. True success is a matter of perspective. It will be measured by whether or not we did the very best that we could with what we had.

On the 30th anniversary of her 1968 Olympic gold medal win, renowned figure skater Peggy Fleming had surgery to remove a malignant tumor in her breast. It's been years since she has skated competitively; however, since the time of her diagnosis, Peggy has dedicated time to tirelessly champion health causes. She is still a fierce competitor in life, striving to better herself and the world around her at every opportunity that she gets. She once said, "I think exercise tests us in so many ways — our skills, our hearts, our ability to bounce back after setbacks. This is the inner beauty of sports and competition, and it can serve us all well as adult athletes."

Patients should be supported in working toward being happy with who they are and with maximizing use of the tools that are at their disposal. As they celebrate their successes, however small they might seem, they will be surprised with how much they really do have to offer to themselves and the world. ■

MATTHEW DAVID HANSEN, DPT, MPT, BSPTS, is a practicing physical therapist in Utah, and president of a healthcare consulting and fitness product company, SOMA Health, LLC. The company's latest product, the Freedom2Move exercise program and video series, was inspired by an IG Living Readers Teleconference. Matt completed his formal education at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City.