Interview: Denise Franklin of Voices and Viewpoints and Assistant Professor Jenny Etnier from University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Transcript:

DF: Hello I am Denise Franklin. Welcome to Voices and Viewpoints.

She travels nationally teaching coaches how to coach their athletes. And to develop their full potential. She says the principles are applicable to business and to life.

JE: You don’t give up on yourself. Just figure out how to retool and how to do it better, how to choose where I can be successful at a level that I'm going to be happy with and then figure out how to do it.

DE: Plus our literary Critic Dudley Shearburn reviews a national award winning biography of President Andrew Jackson

Voices and Viewpoints is next.

DF: Many people around the world have been focused on Vancouver as the winter Olympics took center stage. The audience has always included sports fans and folks who may not regard themselves as such. So we thought this would be an great time to talk to a sports psychologist who has a place on the national stage.

Jenny Etnier is a PhD, a sports psychologist who consults for the United States soccer federation. She has been with the national coaching schools or camps as you might call them for more than a decade.

She is an Associate Professor at University of North Carolina at Greensboro and she is going to talk to us about what it takes to compete and succeed on a national and international level in sports and in life.

Dr. Jenny Etnier. Welcome to Voices and Viewpoints.

JE: Thank you for having me.

DF: You are author of a book called “Bring Your A-Game – A Young Athlete’s Guide to Mental Toughness. I understand its going to be translated possibly to a couple of languages.

JE: I am very excited, yes. They have asked me if they could translate the book
into Japanese and Korean.

**DF:** Absolutely wonderful. Then let’s talk about your philosophy then. You coach coaches and you have written and addressed athletes and parents. If you could sum up your philosophy about sports, what would it be?

**JE:** If young athletes can develop their mental toughness they will have a much better opportunity to reach their potential in sport. And I just see that as such a positive thing for everybody involved.

**DF:** You say something that I thought was just a nugget, was just gold. You say that all athletes should focus on the process rather than the outcome. Explain.

**JE:** Yeah. I think that something that is so key and something that young athletes really need to learn and maybe more importantly Coaches and parents need to learn. The idea here is that if young athletes focus on outcome which means winning, then they are not going to be satisfied all the time. Because in any sporting event there is only one “winner” as it were and everybody else is titled a “loser”. So if young athletes are focusing only on winning then they are not going to feel like they have been successful in sport. Young athletes who focus on process which is the technique of the game, the skill of the game the things you have to do to have a chance to be successful in sport, those young athletes are the ones who are going to be able to stick with it and who are going to be successful in the long run.

**DF:** Well I know there are people who are saying OK, whatever. She is going to be one of those psychologists who say give everybody a trophy. And we should not do that with our children because in life there are winners and losers and we need to teach them that truism early on. But, you say focus on process because ultimately it does make a difference on who wins and who loses in whatever you do right?

**JE:** Yeah that is exactly right. If you look at people who are successful in life, in business, in their profession, in sport, those people have gotten there because they have done the little things that mattered. The little things that are important. They focused on working hard, they focused on effort, they focused on their talents and strengths and they have worked to improve in their weaker areas. And giving trophies and rewarding children just for winning in sport is such the wrong message. I try to teach parents you know when your kid comes out of the field or gym off the pitch. Instead of asking did you win or lose, ask if you had fun, ask if you tried hard. Because the truth is if they had fun and they tried hard, then wait and see what happens down the road. And the outcomes will come.

**DF:** And when watching professional athletes or athletes who compete on a national or international stage, you can tell the ones who are focused on process can’t you?
JE: I think you can. And that’s part of why I love watching sports. Even on television. Even when I am not there in person - especially so with the individual sports. We have all been watching the winter Olympics most recently. When you see those athletes up there, you can almost tell what they are doing. And when you hear the interviews you will hear them say that as well. They will say, “I focused on my turns. I focused on my jumps” “I focused on pieces of the performance which would help me be successful” But they don’t say. I stood up there and thought about winning the Gold Metal. You won’t hear a single athlete saying that.

DF: And when they get behind when they are focused on process they can end up winning. Apollo

JH: Oh My man… Can I say it out loud?

DF: You just did.

JE: Yeah, he is incredible to watch. And look at the way he races his races. He starts out at the back in almost every single event. And if he were focused only on the Gold metal, if that’s what he was thinking, how could he be so courageous as to start in the back. But he is focused on his game, on his race, on his style and on his skills. And he is doing the process things that will help him have the chance to be successful in the end.

DF: And for those who have not been addicted to the winter Olympics, let’s use the example of tennis. Serena Williams is a good example.

JE: In the Australia Open and most recently in the semi final event in the semi final match you may remember she was down one set and four games to love. You can almost see a switch turn in Serena sometimes. And with an athlete who is so incredible once that switch turns, things change, so you could see her in the Australian Open start to focus on “I am just going to get the ball back” “I am just going to get the ball back” - over and over again. And you could see her effort level change and she was chasing down more balls and when she starts to do that, the tide turns. And ultimately as many of us know, she wins the semi final and goes on to win the final in straight sets.

DF: So back to the winter Olympics Talk about Lindsey Vonn who as we all know was battling an injury.

JE: She had to fight though a painful injury in the heat of the event. Much like, people might not know about this lady as much, but Petra Majdic the cross country sprinter who fell in the warm up before having to do four heats… and in that warm up she broke 4 ribs and she goes on to win a bronze metal.
Lindsey Vonn similarly has an injury that is incredibly painful. Fights through it to win several medals at the Olympics. It is unbelievable mental toughness.

**DF:** Talk to us about Lindsey Jacobellis

**JE:** Obviously a more disappointing winter Olympics for her after nearly winning the Gold in Torino four years ago, having that unfortunate fall that ended up with her winning a silver metal. She comes into this winter Olympics hoping to win gold and then she didn’t even make it to the final event. To me I just have to think something was just not quite right in terms of her mental toughness because clearly she had the skill and the potential to be successful. And whether it was a loss of concentration or whether it was a focus too much on outcome -- there was more to be done in terms of her preparation for these winter games.

**DF:** How would you compare her, if you can, with someone like a Bode Miller

**JE:** He has never made any apologies and he has always just said I am going to be who I am and then kind of let the chips fall. That being said, I think he came into this winter Olympics with a little more focus. He talks about the impact of having a young daughter at home who has motivated him to try to be successful and it’s for the better.

**DF:** You are listening to Voices and Viewpoints. I am Denise Franklin and my guest today is Dr. Jenny Etnier. She is a sports psychologist and she works as an associate professor at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. She has her place on the national stage consulting with the United States Soccer Federation. And she is the author of a book called Bring Your A Game, A Young Athlete’s Guide to Mental Toughness.

**DF:** Let’s talk about the Dutch skater Sven Kramer and talk about him from the coaching athletes standpoint.

**JE:** It’s the ten thousand meters skating, speed skating event and in this event the athletes switch lanes throughout the course of the race, and Sven Kramer was in the correct lane but as he was approaching the line by which you have to have made your change to be in the correct lane, his coach looked up and mistakenly thought that he was in the wrong lane. And the coach frantically pointed him switch lanes switch lanes And Sven Kramer had to make a split second decision and went with trusting his coach and switched lanes and unfortunately ended up then being in the wrong lane. So Sven Kramer we believe wins the gold metal when the race ends and then we find out after the fact that he has been disqualified because he was actually in the wrong lane. Your heart goes out to the guy and obviously to the coach.

**DF:** You have your own mental toughness going on for the coach.
JE: Oh absolutely absolutely. For coaches it is as important as well. In their relationship with their athletes they are constantly giving them advice and trying to do their best by their athletes so they have to have incredible mental fortitude as well.

DF: Let’s talk about some of the topics that you talk to your coaches about. As you have your workshops, your camps, your schools and again your sport of choice is soccer but these apply to athletes across the board wouldn’t you say?

JE: Oh absolutely, in fact the lessons I try to teach really transcend sport and apply to any kind of performance venue. I have people who are in charge of small businesses who say that the skills we teach are incredibly helpful to them and certainly to people in the performing arts these skills would be helpful and then obviously yeah for all sports.

DF: Let’s take a few off the list. Burnout and overtraining.

JE: There is a great deal of burnout for young athletes. I guess the poster child for burnout is Jennifer Capriati, the tennis player who had incredible success as a teenager and then dropped out of the sport for a number of years and then ultimately she came back but that’s not usually what happens. Usually when an athlete drops out that’s it, unfortunately we don’t see them anymore. Sport in our society is a high pressure venue and sometimes the rewards might not seem to merit the costs.

DF: Communication?

JE: Critical. Communication between athletes on a team, communication between an athlete and his or her coach, communication between the athletes and their parents and other people who can be supportive in their lives. Really key to fostering the talents that a young athlete has.

DF: Developmental issues of coaching. You say the coaches need to always keep in mind the physical, the psychological, sociological development of children as well as just coaching them for sport

JE: It is important for these coaches and parent coaches and parents as well to really kind of familiarize themselves with the literature which suggests what athletes can handle and what they can’t handle. As an example if I am coaching a team of seven year olds in soccer I would talk about shape and I would talk about space and positioning on the field but if you have ever seen seven year olds play soccer there is only one thing they care about.

DF: The ball
JE: The ball. Thank you very much. That’s exactly right so because of that, not to say that coaches can’t start to introduce some higher level concepts – flexibility, about the ability to adjust to new situations, about consistency, about being able to perform well regardless of whether you are expected to win or expected to lose. Step out there and do the same performance over and over again. But coaches shouldn’t be frustrated when seven year olds don’t pick everything up. They should really think about, OK, the athletes really care about the ball so why do I have 18 children out here and only one ball. That makes no sense.

DF: Well Dr Etnier I thank you. This is a fascinating conversation but let’s take a break and when we come back talk about other topics for athletes’ parents and coaches and how this can apply to other professions as well. And we are going to talk a little more about you and that book called Bring Your A Game.

You are listening to Voices and Viewpoints I am Denise Franklin. My guest today is Dr Jenny Etnier a sports psychologist. We will be right back.

Welcome back to Voices and Viewpoints. I am Denise Franklin and my guest today is Jenny Etnier a sports psychologist. She consults with the United States Soccer Federation. She has been working with national coaching schools or camps as you might call them for more than a decade. She is an associate professor at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and she is in the Department of Kinesiology. Let’s define that term.

JE: That’s a great question. Kinesiology is the science of human movement and the Department of Kinesiology includes what has been historically referred to as physical education, motor learning, motor development, sport and exercise psychology, exercise physiology, biomechanics.

DF: Is it growing in popularity because I think I hear that term a lot more.

JE: In fact our department is one of the biggest departments at UNCG and we get a lot of students who are interested in going into health professions.

DF: You consider yourself to be more of an educator even though you work with coaches. And now you are lecturing to young athletes because of your book, Bring Your A Game. You still think of yourself as an educator.

JE: Absolutely. I am just so interested in trying to get some of this information out to more and more people. And I think it is so important for coaches and parents and young athletes to have information about sport psychology because again it is so critical to young athletes in terms of them being able to reach their potential in sport to enjoy their sport experience.

DF: We’ve been talking about some of the Olympic athletes and how you watch the Olympic games and what you watch for. Let’s talk about a couple of other
things that you think are important for athletes to excel and coaches to understand as they are coaching athletes. We talked about focusing more on the process rather than the outcome but part of that you say is imagery that athletes employ. Talk about that.

JE: Yeah. Mental imagery or mental practice is a skill that a number of élite athletes use. In fact probably almost all of them. Essentially what they are doing is visualizing their performance before they actually get out there and perform. Mental imagery is really fascinating because you can use it at all kinds of different times. You can use it as you are riding the bus to school, as you are getting ready to go to bed at night. And you can use it immediately before a performance. Watching the downhill skiers in the Olympics you can see them imaging. If you see them at the start gate – they close their eyes, they move their hands back and forth and you might wonder what they are doing. They are mentally visualizing themselves go down the run. They are focusing on every turn and every movement and everything they are going to have to do to get to the bottom of that hill successfully. And when they do that they are practicing the muscle movements. They may include auditory parts in their imagery. They might hear the crowd. They might hear the start gun and the start cadence before they are going to go. And they will also use kinesthetics. They will feel themselves moving from side to side down the course. What’s really fascinating about downhill skiers is that if you actually start a stop watch, when you find them visualizing going down the run what you will find is if you ask them to tell you when they stop visualizing and you stop the stop watch, you look at the time, it will look remarkably similar to what they are going to score when they actually go down the run.

DF: How long does it take to be able to use imagery successfully?

JE: Yeah well I think it is something that you can continue to hone as a young adult or even as an older adult for that matter. It’s a skill though that we should be introducing to athletes at a young age because no matter where they start it is a skill they can practice and improve upon. And even if its somewhat rudimentary it’s still a skill that’s going to help them in terms of learning to manage their energy levels before they perform, in terms of automatizing their performance. And partly too, with young athletes we don’t want them physically practicing for incredible numbers of hours a day because physically that would be too much.

DF: Talk more about managing energy levels.

JE: The athletes that are able to be successful during competition have really learned what their energy level has to be like before a performance. And then they even learn mental skills that they can use to get them to that optimal level of energy. And what’s fascinating about that is that it is really different for different people. And it may also be different from sport to sport so you imagine an elite
level golfer who is getting ready to hit a putt. Well he or she doesn’t want to have a high level of energy to hit a putt, but if you think about a sprinter then he or she needs to have a high level of energy to be successful in that sport. So there are some differences between the power vs the finesse requirements of the sport. Sometimes it can change even within an event so you think about a quarterback who initially might need a low level of energy so he can scan the field and see all his receivers and be aware of all his options, but if the defender is coming at him he’s got to tuck the ball and run and pretty quickly his energy level has got to go up, his field of view is going to narrow, and he is going to be designed now for a more powerful movement.

**DF:** We have talked about a lot of key topics when it comes to mental toughness. Which ones are most applicable when it comes to business or professions.

**JE:** Goal setting for example. Goal setting is really important in sport. I have often said if you don’t know where you want to go then how are you going to get there? And for athletes and for business people, if you can identify where you want to be in 1 year, 2 years, 4 years. Well that’s a start. But then if you use goal setting skills appropriately then what you also do is identify some short term goals that are going to lead the way and build the platforms that are going to help you reach that long term goal. So goal setting I think is vitally important in sport but it is one that clearly makes sense for the business people as well.

But I guess if you are interested in being nationally successful in sport I think that the skills in sports psychology are so important because if you keep your pool of athletes as large as possible for as long as possible and if you help all of those athletes improve as much as possible then your talent level is going to rise unbelievably.

**DF:** And what is ironic is that at the young age of 10, 11, or even 12 they are not even physiologically who they are going to be.

**JE:** Oh thanks Denise that’s a great point that’s exactly right. I mean many times we see young athletes being selected for Olympic development programs, for elite level teams, for state teams when they are 10 or 11. The truth is we have very good evidence that shows that even the best coaches in the world are not going to be able to identify which athletes are ultimately going to be successful when they are that young because we are going to inadvertently lose kids who have the potential when they are 14 or 15 be unbelievable.

**DT:** Now that you have written your book, Bring Your A Game, A Young Athlete’s Guide to Mental Toughness. Is there one message that seems to be more popular than others?
JE: What I really seem to be hearing from the athletes is that they need to believe in themselves and focus on being the best ‘them’ that they can be. Because I think they get so many external messages that again are about trophies and championships. They want someone to help them with their confidence. To help give them the skills so that they can be confident in going for their goals and their dreams and have the chance to be successful in sport.

DF: You splayed sport?

JE: I did. I am a sports junky.

DF: I can tell, by the way.

JE: I love it. I love to play it, I love to watch it, I love to read about it and clearly I love to talk about it.

DF: And as an educator and a professor in kinesiology what was the most important lesson you learned from playing sports?

JE: I certainly learned at a very young age to be able to give it my all, to be able to try my hardest but then to be satisfied with that. You know, and that is so key. My parents are incredible competitors. And still I laugh because my parents are about 70 and I still keep thinking.. you know one day.. I am going to beat them at ping pong, it happens to be ping pong, but they are so good. They are such incredible competitors. I still don’t beat them. And now I am getting older. So I worry

DF: You have your daughter.

JE: I have my daughter. Yeah. But I think the key lessons are that is so important to Bring Your A Game. To do everything that you can to focus on what you can control, to give your best effort. But then you have to be happy with that. And if it’s not enough. Then you figure out how to retool, how to do it again and how to do it better or harder or stronger. But you don’t give up on yourself. You just figure out how to retool and how to do it better. How to train harder. How to choose a level where I’m going to be happy with and then you go for it. And Denise if people did that whether it be in sports, in their business, their professional lives, the performing arts, whatever venue. If we all reached our potential in whatever avenue we pursued because we pursued it with the greatest effort. It just seems to me that the world would be a better place.

DF: Well thank you Jenny Etnier. It’s been a great class discussion.

JE: Well thank you. I feel silly ending on such a warm and fuzzy note. I have high hopes. I have high hopes for what people can achieve.
**DF:** Well. You brought your A-game to Voices sand Viewpoints today and I appreciate you joining us in this important conversation.

**JE:** Thank you so much for having me. My pleasure.