Episode 23: Playing To Win vs Playing Not To Lose

This is the Agility Challenge Podcast with your host, me, Daisy Peel. You're listening to episode 23. Welcome to the Agility Challenge Podcast. I'm your host, Daisy Peel. Join me as I talk about everything related to the mental side of the sport of dog agility. If you've ever felt overwhelmed by negative self talk or lack of confidence, or if your dog training to do list seems so long that you don't even know where to get started, this podcast is for you.

You can have the best training and the best skills and the best dog and access to the best trainers, coaches, and instructors in the world. But if you don't have your mental game under control, you'll never be able to successfully use all those skills you have to the best of your abilities. Now, let's dive in to today's episode.

Hello friend and welcome back to the Agility Challenge podcast. Today I want to pose this question to you and even though on the surface it might seem like it's just words, I do think it's a biggie. Here's the question. Are you playing to win or are you playing not to lose? So think about that. I'll repeat myself.

Are you playing to win? Are you playing to win or are you playing not to lose? Now, this is a podcast about the mental side of dog agility. So I'm going to restrict that to when it comes to dog agility, especially when you step to the line at a competition. Are you playing to win or are you playing not to lose?

Now, why do I think that this distinction is important? In dog agility, as in life in general, our mindset, which I talk a lot about in this podcast, whether we're playing to win or whether we're playing not to lose, our mindset is going to shape everything from our training routines to how we strategize and handle a course on competition day.

So first off, when I say playing to win, what do I mean by that? It's about being brave and taking those leaps of faith and embracing challenges head on. Playing to win means trying out new techniques, exploring fresh approaches, and always seeking improvement. Playing to win is, it's a growth mindset. It's the mindset that pushes us to evolve and step out of our comfort zones and Playing to win, even though it can involve, um, risk taking, which might lead to more failure, also leads to amazing growth and development.

If you're playing to win, that means that you're coming from a proactive, more forward thinking mentality. Playing to win is characterized by a willingness to take risks, seek opportunities for growth, and actively pursue success or victory. Playing to win is in my mind all about embracing challenges. And if you're operating from within a playing to win mindset, then I think you're going to be a lot more likely to step out of your comfort zone and think creatively about challenges that come your way and tackle those challenges.

And you're going to think about. Things that come your way in terms of challenges rather than threats. You're going to be more likely to view setbacks as learning experiences rather than reflections on your character or value as a human being. And if you're coming from, if you're operating from within a playing to win mindset, that means to me that you are driven more by the pursuit of excellence

So this whole idea of playing to win versus playing not to lose, you could also call it growth mindset versus fixed mindset, and it kind of also tracks right along with process oriented rather than outcome oriented. A playing to win mindset is. Um, it can be a little bit tougher because, um, I mean, it's not once you get used to it, it's kind of, kind of a catch 22, but it definitely is a mindset where you're willing to take risks, even though you know that at least some of the time, and maybe a lot of the time, the risk taking is going to result in failure, but you have more of a warrior than a worrier mindset, warrior.

Versus warrior, that's another small distinction, but big difference. Um, if you have that warrior mindset, you're playing to win, you're, you're going for it. You're gonna lose, some of the time. And I don't mean winning first place, losing dead last. Winning, losing, you're gonna win in the sense that you're gonna achieve the desired outcome with respect to the risk that you took.

Lose, meaning you're not gonna achieve the desired outcome with the risk that you took. On the other hand, playing not to lose is more about, um, sticking within your comfort zone, sticking to tried and true methods, things you know have worked before and are highly likely to work again. Um, you're aiming for reliability and you really want to avoid mistakes.

Now, I will say that if you are operating from within a playing not to lose mindset, it does.

Risk taking can feel like it requires a lot of bravery and a lot of, um, comfort with discomfort and stepping into the unknown and being at the edge of your comfort zone and all that stuff. Playing Not to Lose is... It's a more cautious and conservative

approach. If you're playing not to lose, you're going to be working to avoid mistakes, and pers pers preserving, blup blup, preserving what you perceive you already have.

Which is kind of weird because, if you step to the line at a competition with an agility run, with your dog, And you are in a playing not to lose mindset. You're working to preserve a cue or a clean run that you feel like you already have. When really that's not the case. When you step to the line, you don't have a cue.

You don't have a clean run. You have nothing yet. You need to manifest that by proceeding through the run. But playing not to lose, you're typically working to pre, pre, preserve. Boy, I don't know why I stumbled on that. You're trying to preserve what you perceive. You already possess it's kind of a tongue twister.

That's playing not to lose trying to preserve what you perceive You already possess but you don't already possess that clean run. So it's kind of a It's a little bit of a misguided feeling. You don't you don't have a clean run to preserve There's nothing to preserve now what I do think people want to preserve a lot of the time with a playing not to lose mindset is ego and Um, we feel like maybe if we don't get that clean run or it says something about our self worth.

So that, that's kind of all wrapped up in that playing not to lose mindset as well. A playing not to lose mindset value security and stability, like I said before, but also it will prevent you from. Working towards the risky, sometimes risky business of learning new handling strategies and new training strategies.

And so it is going to, over time, that playing not to lose strategy is going to cost you and

you will end up losing, air quotes, losing more. Because as the sport changes, if you don't get involved with risk change, risk taking. And a playing not to win, a playing to win mindset, then it's going to be harder for you to sort of keep up with things, um, as they evolve.

So, I want to talk a little bit about how the mindsets, those two mindsets of playing to win versus playing not to lose, what it looks like when they shape your training routines when it comes to dog agility. So, if you're playing to win, then... You are going to be more likely to investigate and integrate new training techniques or approaches to handling and training into your training routine.

This is going to involve, uh, potentially experimenting with various handling styles. Or looking for innovative ways that are new to you to tackle course challenges or even incorporating unconventional training equipment or props to challenge your dog's skills. That's a playing to win mindset. Playing to win handlers will actively seek out challenging courses or exercises that push their dogs and their own abilities.

They're more likely or you're more likely to set up complex sequences. or introduce distractions during training to simulate the unpredictability of a competition environment. If you're playing to win, then your focus is going to be on preparing yourself and your dog for various scenarios that you might encounter during a real agility run.

And when something unexpected happens, instead of avoiding it, if you're playing to win, you're going to be much more likely to lean into it. Dig into it and engage in some purposeful practice so that that thing that's perceived as a risk and a challenge is no

longer a risk or a challenge once you're done digging into it.

On the other hand, if you're playing to lose, those things tend to feel pretty threatening and if you're in a playing to, not to lose mindset, um, you're going to be less likely to head towards those challenges. I'm going to get, I'm going to try really hard not to get the terms confused. They're just so similar, um, When you say them out loud, playing to win versus playing not to lose or playing to avoid loss, they're very similar, so I'm going to get a little tongue twisted, but it's playing to win versus playing not to lose.

The playing to win approach also. Emphasizes constant growth and improvement. So, if you're a playing to win handler, you're going to be more likely to set specific goals for your training sessions, looking to improve your dog's speed, accuracy, refine certain techniques, and you're going to be looking at your personal bests, um, on a course, or you and your dog's personal best, and looking to beat those.

If you're not looking at competition, looking to beat your competition, you're going to be looking at your own. Record looking to beat that. On the other hand, if you're playing not to lose, then you're going to be more likely to stick to what you already know in your training routines. You're gonna end up repeating things over and over that you've already done before, consistent exercises, familiar sequences, um, you know, stuff that you know is within your comfort zone so that you're likely to get the course right.

You're also, and this kind of goes hand in hand, if you are operating from a playing not to lose mindset, you are going to be much more likely to be more cautious in your training and avoid exercises or techniques that might lead to mistakes on your part or the dog's part. You're going to try and make everything comfortable and controlled, um,

minimizing errors.

You're going to be more likely to make sure your dog gets a contact, even if you have to step in and point and help, instead of working to increase your dog's independence on the contacts. If you are in a playing not to lose mindset, a playing to avoid loss mindset, you're going to be much more likely to work on the same types of sequences over and over, rather than looking for unique challenges that will keep you on your toes more and keep your dogs on its toes more and at the edge of your comfort zone and at the edge of your skills.

Now, these things are kind of fluid. Most people are not always playing to win or always playing not to lose. And in practice, in reality, successful handlers and trainers will often strike a balance between these two mindsets. And it's also worth noting that if you play to win, if you try and, and are successful at adopting a play to win mindset and you tackle risks head on, you're engaged in more risk taking, um, activities when it comes to maybe going for that blind cross that you're not sure about instead of the rear cross that you're more comfortable with.

You're going to grow your skill set and fewer things will feel risky. So you don't always, you're not always going to have to be in a playing to win mindset, but if you are normally in a playing to win mindset and you've been working to Take those risks and your skill set has expanded as a as a result of that Then when you do adopt a more conservative playing to avoid loss Mindset, you're still gonna have way more skills and options at your disposal And you're gonna be more likely to be successful without having to get real clutchy and super duper conservative so Although there's a balance if you are Aiming for the play to win mindset, you're almost always going to be better off and ultimately the

key is going to be in recognizing when each mindset is more effective for you and or your dog and how to integrate a play to win mindset and a play to avoid loss mindset to really optimize the training and handling experience.

Okay, well that's kind of what it looks like in training. What does a playing to win mindset look like in competition versus playing not to lose? So handlers with a playing to win mindset are going to be at a competition looking for the riskier, faster handler, handling techniques. So they're going to go for that blind cross that they're not real sure about.

They think it might work, but they're not real sure about instead of the rear cross that they're much more comfortable with. They are going to be looking for the most direct line, aggressive handling, or assertive handling, and looking for opportunities to work on challenging maneuvers, maneuvers that are challenging for them, to gain speed and shave off time.

Now this might mean, um, taking some risks that are going to end up with a dropped bar, or, uh, an off course, or things like that. But... And it's also going to be, typically, if you're in a playing to win mindset, you're going to go for a riskier strategy that requires that you execute. pretty close to flawlessly.

And if you don't execute flawlessly, um, it's going to result in an elimination. Um, and a handler that's in a more of a playing not to lose mindset might go for a strategy that feels a little bit risky, but errors don't mean an elimination, it just means a little bit of time. A handler that is operating in a play to win mindset is going to prioritize speed and precision on a course at a competition over cautiousness.

They're going to encourage their dogs to take an, take obstacles at a quicker pace and are going to be more likely to accept higher risks of faults or errors on the course in favor of achieving a faster time. Now, big picture, if you are playing to win and not, uh, playing to avoid loss, you're still going to want to maintain criteria, but you're going to want to be able to maintain criteria at that higher speed.

So if you're in a play to win mindset, you're going to be more likely to push the boundaries of your speed, of your dog's speed, um, you're going to be looking for the fastest time, um, and the emphasis here is... on the mindset and the process and really going after the course rather than running conservatively to just get a clean run regardless of how inefficient your time on your dog's lines might be.

Also, handlers who are adopting a play to win mindset at a competition are going to be more likely to adapt quickly to unexpected situations or course challenges. You're going to be more likely to be able to make split second decisions on the course, um, and make handling adjustments on the fly to really get the most out of your dog's performance and speed as well as your own performance and speed.

On the other hand, if at a competition you are playing to avoid loss or playing not to lose, you're going to be more likely to opt for a more conservative, safer handling technique. Um, you're going to choose lines that reduce the risk of faults or mistakes and favor a safer, more controlled approach.

You're going to be more okay with wider turns or safer handling to make sure that you have accuracy and reliability over speed. If you are coming from a playing not to lose mindset, you're going to, again, you're going to be more, more focused on minimizing

faults and errors, even if it means sacrificing speed or the quality of your criteria.

You're going to aim for a clean run without any penalties. Um, but a lot of the times you're also going to end up sacrificing criteria. So a lot of handlers that you see at a show who are. They're coming from a play not to lose mindset. They just want a clean run no matter the cost. They don't, you're not gonna, I mean nobody here, but they're not going to care so much about the quality of their dog's contact.

They don't care so much if the dog met criteria. It's just, did the dog hit the yellow? That's good enough. So, um, again, playing not to lose. Involves handling more conservatively, but also it typically involves more sacrificing of good criteria in order to be successful in the moment. So, uh, being okay with your dog just having a toenail in the yellow versus, oh, that contact was not good enough for me.

I'm going to redo it and do a fix and go, even if it means an elimination because my contacts are more important than this particular clean run. Okay. So those are some of the differences between the playing to win mindset and the playing not to lose mindset. So let's really dig in a little bit now to the benefits of adopting a playing to win mindset.

When you're playing to win, you're willing to take risks. On the flip side, if you're playing not to lose, you fearlessly.

and energized. But when you're playing not to lose, you're going to end up handling your dog around the course in a stiff, clutchy manner because you're holding back. When you're operating within a play to win mindset, you are going to handle more assertively and proactively. And when you're operating with a playing not to lose mindset, You are

going to end up being more reactive in your handling, and like I said, clutchy, that just feeling that you're holding tight when you should be handling fast and loose.

Self aware, but not self judgmental and aware of your, the physicality of it. At the end of it, a really easy way to remember this, and one of the, one of the biggest benefits to adopting a play to win mindset versus a playing not to lose mindset, is that if you're in a play to win mindset, you're going to view winning as a challenge.

You're reaching up. It's a challenge. It might be difficult, but it's doable. On the other hand, not losing is a threat. Just framing the same game that way. Winning is a challenge. Not losing is a threat will change your response to the circumstances. Now, one of my favorite books, I really enjoy sports books and.

Um, books on mental toughness and things like that. One of my favorite books is a book called, Top Dog, The Science of Winning and Losing. And I'll put a link to it in the show notes. So in this book, Top Dog, there was a study that they referenced. And the study that they did was, Um, they did it so that they could illustrate how different your results on a test could be, based on whether or not you viewed the test as a threat or a challenge.

So here's an excerpt from Top Dog, The Science of Winning and Losing. A study was done by Alter and Aronson with Princeton undergrads. The researchers presented the students with a test of GRE questions. And for half the students, the questions were presented in a threat context. These questions were a test, and the students were told this, they were a test of the student's ability and a judgment on whether they truly belonged at Princeton.

The other students got the same questions, but in a challenge context. That test was titled intellectual challenge questionnaire and the questions were framed as brain teasers. Nobody was expected to solve them all. And in the threat context what they found was the Princeton undergrads got 72 percent correct.

And in the challenge context they got 90 percent correct. And the thing is, the thing of it is, the tests weren't different. The questions were the same. The only thing that changed was the way they were presented to the test takers. And the frame of mind that that presentation put the test takers in prior to taking that test.

Fear of losing is a threat and threats are intimidating and burdensome. So if you walk to the line and you are thinking, Oh, I, I got to make sure I handle everything to keep a queue. I got to make sure I handle everything to keep a clean run. I got to make sure I handle in a way that I don't lose. That's a threat.

And you just immediately burden yourself with that. But winning, like I said before, is a challenge. And. It's difficult, but achievable. And the thing is, yes, only one team can win a round, and that's fine. It's fine to go for it, even if you think your chances are small, because the risk taking strategies that you engage in as a part of that process are worth it.

Playing it safe, playing not to lose, is like asking fear to join the game. It's like saying, hey fear, Come along with me for this run. Just sit on my shoulders like a monkey. It's all about being more scared of losing than feeling the rush of winning. And I've talked about this before in my podcast, how people will come out of a run, I talked about this in

episode 22, I'll be happy when people will go into the ring saying, I'll be happy when this run is over.

And they come out of the ring feeling relieved. And that kind of ties right into playing to win versus playing not to lose. They're scared of losing. and experience relief when they don't lose, rather than going for the win. Yes, you open yourself up to the disappointment of not winning, but you also put yourself on the path to feel the rush of winning, or even coming close, closer than you thought you could come.

And when you play to win, that is where the real power of all of this is. It's, it's all about believing in yourself and taking on the challenge. Not necessarily, certainly believing that the risk will pay off, but believing that you can engage in the strategy of trying the risk and taking on the challenge.

And again, it's not about being perfect, it's just about, You know, walk in, walk up to the line, do your thing, and see what happens. Don't, don't be thinking, I don't want to lose. Just go for it. Get comfortable with the, with the idea that you're there to take some risks, and you're there to go for a challenge.

And in that way, you can you can kind of chill out the emotional and fearful part of your brain, your amygdala. And, and Unburden yourself from the fear that comes along with the fear of losing and allow yourself to focus on the really cool stuff that could happen during a run, win or lose. When you're more focused on dodging the bad stuff instead of aiming for the good stuff, that, that playing not to lose is a real avoidance strategy and playing to win is a real go for it lean in strategy.

So when you're more focused on dodging the bad stuff instead of aiming for the good stuff, your thoughts are going to go right downhill. And instead of thinking, I'm going to nail this blind cross, you're going to end up thinking, oh I hope I don't mess up this blind cross, and then there's that fear that you've just put right in the spotlight.

And here's the deal, whatever you're thinking about the most is most likely to happen. So, if all you're thinking about is how much you don't want to lose, then guess what's likely to happen? You're just thinking, lose, lose, lose, lose, lose. But if you're all about the win, and that's where your mind is at, then all of the actions that cascade out of that are going to be much more likely to follow the pursuit of that win.

Now again, I say win big picture. Win can mean a podium box, it can mean a blue ribbon, it can mean your first clean run, it could mean, um, your first trip into the ring where you're not panicking because of some performance anxiety, whatever. But playing to win is about focusing on success versus focusing on preventing mistakes.

And you might not think that that small brain tweak makes a huge difference, but I promise you, it makes a big difference. It's the difference between. Worryer, being worried about everything, and warrior, going for it and attacking it. So check out that book, Top Dog, The Science of Winning and Losing, I'll put a link in the show notes.

And also, check out another favorite author of mine, her name is Carol Dweck, and she wrote some really great material on mindset. So it's Carol Dweck, D W E C K, and I'll put some links to her books in the show notes also. So it's just some great stuff if you're curious about some of the many, many studies on, um, Um, how your mindset can make such a huge difference in how you tackle challenges, especially in a competitive setting.

So playing to win versus playing not to lose. So I want you guys to think about for yourselves, are you playing to win or are you playing not to lose? And sometimes maybe that's kind of fluid. Sometimes maybe you're playing to win, sometimes you're playing not to lose. What determines what happens when?

So in dog agility, blending the thrill of taking risks with the security of consistency can be a pretty winning combination. You embrace the challenge and you take calculated risks, but you also maintain a solid foundation of reliable criteria, contacts, weaves, jumping, that sort of thing. And while you're embracing challenges and taking risks, remember that some of those risks that you take are going to fail and some are going to pay off, but over time The risks that you took and succeeded at and learned more about are going to become just a normal part of your training and handling.

So things are going to go more from the risk category into the known category if you keep taking risks and trying and failing and succeeding. Once you've gone after and taken risks, you're going to know way more about what works with regards to those specific risks and what doesn't. And the more that you play to win, the more of what you perceived as risk becomes over time just the way you do it.

When it comes to playing not to lose and working to protect what you perceive as already yours, I do think it's important to remember that when you step to the line with your dog, a clear round is never guaranteed. Avoiding risk and struggle may produce a clear round, but that's just, it's just not the same as playing to win, taking a risk, and coming out on top.

And yes, if you play to win, you are going to lose, but not all the time. And when you do win, however you want to define that, it's going to be just that much sweeter because you really, really went for it. Now another thing I want to touch on before I wrap up, um, and this came up just the other day. I was talking to a student about it and then I talked to students in office hours in my online program, The Agility Challenge.

And that is the other big reason why you're going to want to practice a play to win mindset over a playing not to lose mindset. And that is this. If you go to a regional or national event, Where the goal is to do well enough compared to the top of the class to advance or you make it to the finals and the goal is to win.

Suddenly, you are in an environment where a play to win mindset is necessary. And if you have been operating from within a playing not to lose mindset all year at the local events leading up to that big regional or national championship event. If the only mindset you've ever operated in is a playing not to lose mindset, when you go to that regional or national event and suddenly it's very clear that a play to win mindset is required, you're going to be much less skilled with that and much more likely to get reckless when you decide, I'm just going to go for it.

That's not really exactly what playing to win is. It's not just abandoning everything and going for it and running pell mell like you're being chased by bees. So the other big reason to really think about whether or not you are Operating in a play to win mindset or a playing not to lose mindset is that you need to practice that playing to win mindset to get comfortable with it, so that when you do go to an event where it's required or heavily emphasized, it's a skill.

That, that mindset is a skill. Mindset is a skill just like everything else is a skill, and if you practice it, you'll get better at it. So that, that was the, the other thing that I really wanted to make sure that I put in there, especially because I'm heading to the U. S. Open. Uh, next week, actually, as of recording this, I know some people who are preparing for national championships in the spring, they're already thinking about it, and what I recommend to them is, alright, you're already qualified, time to start practicing that play to win mindset so that when you get to nationals, it's not completely foreign to you.

Alright, so, after having listened to me ramble on and on, I want you to ask yourself, are you playing to win, or... Are you playing not to lose? And if you agree with me, that playing to win can really pay off when it comes to experiencing all our sport has to offer. The highs as well as the lows. And if you think that you're playing not to lose right now, what's it going to look like for you to shift your thinking and actions to a more playing to win mindset?

I'd love to hear from you. Leave a comment at podcast. theagilitychallenge. com forward slash 23 and let's keep the discussion going on the difference between playing to win and playing not to lose. Also, if you know somebody who could benefit from what I talked about today, Share this podcast episode. At the web page for this episode, which is podcast.

theagilitychallenge. com forward slash 23, you'll see a section toward the bottom that says share the love where you'll find instructions and links for how to subscribe to and share this podcast and also how to leave a rating and review in Apple Podcasts. I'm a pretty tech savvy person, but even for me, it was a little tricky the first time.

So again, at the webpage for the episode, I've included a how to link for you at the bottom of the page. So go ahead, head on over to podcast. theagilitychallenge. com forward slash 23. Subscribe to the podcast, leave a review, share it with a friend, and also leave a comment below the episode and let me know what your thoughts are about playing to win versus playing not to lose.

What do you think about this topic? Where do you see yourself as falling on this spectrum of playing to win versus playing not to lose? I'd love to hear your thoughts and maybe even discuss on a future episode.