

### 3 Takeaways Podcast Transcript

Lynn Thoman

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#### Ep. 177: Top Dog: An Expert On The Science Of Winning Shares Powerful Tips And Strategies To Improve Performance

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**INTRO (male voice):** Welcome to the 3 Takeaways Podcast, which features short, memorable conversations with the world's best thinkers, business leaders, writers, politicians, scientists, and other newsmakers. Each episode ends with the three key takeaways that person has learned over their lives and their careers. And now your host and board member of schools at Harvard, Princeton and Columbia, Lynn Thoman.

**Lynn Thoman:** Hi everyone, it's Lynn Thoman. Welcome to another 3 Takeaways episode. We've all heard that if you put in 10,000 hours of practice and stick with it and believe in yourself, you'll be successful. But is that actually true? According to Ashley Merryman, who has studied the science of winning and what separates winners and losers, the winners are not the people who practice the most or believe in themselves the most as many in the self-esteem movement would have us believe. Ash has taught Olympians and professional athletes how to perform better and even thrive in competitions and under pressure. She's advised Fortune 100 executives and military leaders on building a winning culture. She has also co-authored the wonderful, if counterintuitive book, Top Dog, which has transformed the world of elite performance. I'm excited to find out what it actually takes to win, how we can all win and thrive under pressure. And also on the flip side, how we can avoid losing. Welcome Ash. And thanks so much for joining 3 Takeaways today.

**Ashley Merryman:** Oh, well thank you so much for having me. But I kind of just want to stop now.

[laughter]

**LT:** Thanks for coming. I'm excited to talk to you.

[laughter]

**AM:** Thank you.

**LT:** Ash, you argue pretty controversially that the benefit of competition is not winning. So what is the benefit of competition?

**AM:** For one thing, I can't guarantee you're going to win. I just can't. Actually, the more you compete, the more I can guarantee not that you're going to win, I can guarantee you're going to lose, because the competition gets better. As you get better, your competition is tougher, the demands on you and the pressure are higher. The benefit of competition, and what I can guarantee if you keep competing over time is you're going to get better in the moment and over time. And when you have

that continual progress, eventually you are going to start winning. You may not win every time, but that's what's going on. And you can benefit from competition even when it's just a complete blowout because you've learned about what you should be doing better. You learned how the competitors are doing things, you can watch them and go, "Oh, I should have done that next time." So that's the real benefit of competition. It's improvement, not just the W.

**LT:** And what makes someone a successful competitor? What does it take to be what you call a "top dog"?

**AM:** Well, actually, in some ways that was almost sarcastic. Not the title itself. But there is this idea that you're a winner or you're not, right? You're the top dog or you're not. So then there must just be this sort of magic list of traits that make someone a top dog. And the science of competition actually says that's not true. The science of competition says there's a universe of things. And if you know the science that will help you compete in the moment. So it's not that there's just this one archetype of here's a winner and everybody else doesn't also win. It's understanding, "If I get nervous during a competition, here's how I should respond." It's using that experience so that you get better at it. As an example, home-field advantage matters. So if you end up at a restaurant and you're going to have a sales call and you're like, "Hey, I got here early..."

**AM:** Do I sit at the table or do I wait and greet them at the door?" You sit at the table, you learn your waiter's name, you order drinks, you move everything around the table so that it's set up like your office. And even in that small moment, research has shown even 45 seconds of home-field advantage actually results in a better negotiation technique. If you know that you're someone who gets really stressed under pressure, then you want to start thinking about the competition starting earlier. Most people distract themselves, "I'm not going to think about it till right before then," but that's actually the worst approach because if something happens right before then you don't have time to recover.

**LT:** Interesting. What makes someone a bad winner or a good loser?

**AM:** It's interesting. They're the same. When you look at who's a good winner and who's a good loser and who's a bad winner and who's a bad loser, those are the same people. A good winner is someone who respects the competition and they respect the structure, they respect the organizers, they respect the rule of the game and they respect their competitors. The good winner says, "Wow, I worked really hard and this paid off. Wow, that was close." And the good loser says, "Well, I blew it today, congratulations, you did better, but I learned from that and I'm going to get you next time." And the bad loser is, "Well, it was just rigged and it was against me and I should've won." And the bad winner goes, "Nah nah nah nah, of course I won. I'm great."

**AM:** And if their framework is not born out of respect for the competition and the people they're competing against but, "I'm innately so wonderful," then it doesn't matter how they win, they can cheat because, "Well, I want to win anyway." So the bad winner is the same as the bad loser, and that's about that belief of entitlement that they're just so superior it doesn't even matter what's going on. But that's a real problem because those people will cheat because they think that the results, the effort, the actual competition, were really irrelevant.

**LT:** You write in your book about the difference between playing to win and playing not to lose. Can you explain.

**AM:** This is so important. Playing to win and playing not to lose, and you hear this as a sports metaphors all the time, right? Some announcer goes, "Oh, well they're playing to win today," or "Playing not to lose." But it turns out these aren't just mere metaphors. They're actually fundamentally different ways of thinking about the competition. If you're playing to win, you're thinking about not just the specific win of the day, but the whole outcome. An Olympian who's playing to win is envisioning their Olympic record and the fact that they're going to get their face on a Wheaties box and maybe they'll be the president. And it's this whole context of wonderful things that have come from it. And if every one of those things are coming from it, well then I'm going to go for it. I'm going to take risks because I'm not going to miss out on my face on the Wheaties box and my place in history because I was a little shy on something. And I want to see here the big picture because this is the strategy I've got going. If you want to help me, give me praise, tell me what I'm doing right so I can keep doing it. Don't distract me with details. Don't distract me what I'm doing wrong, just let's just keep on going because I'm going to win.

**AM:** And if you're playing not to lose, it's this entirely different mindset. You're not thinking about the good outcome, because there is no good outcome. It's just not losing. You're preventing disaster. And if you're preventing disaster, "Well, if you want to help me, don't waste my time with this praise nonsense. Tell me what I'm doing wrong so I can fix it. Do you see all of the details that I need to take care of? And the one thing I don't do is the one thing that I'm going to miss. And even if I'm successful, there's no joy in this because I just could've kicked the can down the road a couple days, someday I'm going to lose, right? So, I can't celebrate not losing." And in fact, even people who are playing to win will think a tie is a loss. And people who are playing not to lose think a tie as a win because they didn't lose.

**LT:** So interesting. What else can people do to put themselves in a better position to win?

**AM:** I think a lot of it has to do with that sort of focus on what your goal is and not losing sight of the goal. And sometimes most, if you think about lawyers or surgeons or stockbrokers, well we'll put an asterisk on stockbrokers, but most people in their professions are actually paid not to lose. Lawyers are told, "Never ask a question that you are not already going to have the answer for," architects are told, "Build something that's not going to fall down during an earthquake." So we're really preventing things from mistakes. And the focus is really on that risk prevention as opposed to, what can we do that's possible? And obviously I'm not saying, well, lawyers should just not worry about the outcome and architects should not worry about buildings falling down, of course those are important things, but you need to have time for one and the other. And you also need to know when you're going to switch into that mindset. So asking yourself what's the art of the possible first, and then giving yourself that switch to see if you can do this in a safe and successful way. I think that that's really important.

**LT:** There's a trope that men are better at competition than women. What did your research find in terms of gender differences in competing?

**AM:** It was so funny because I'm a girl and I'm very competitive and it drove me crazy when I was reading science that women can't compete. I was like, "That's just ridiculous." And then I found the research of Muriel Niederle, and Muriel has people come into the lab and do these sort of easy math questions, but she says, "Before you take the test, what I want to know is, do you want me to pay you for every right answer or do you want to compete with three other people and whoever gets the

best score gets all the money?" 73% of the guys said, game on, I'm in the competition. And only 35% of the women were willing to do that. And everyone looked at Muriel's research and said, "See, women can't compete." And we were thinking about that going, "Ooh, well, seventy... That's a big spread. 40%...

**AM:** That's not a margin of error or anything." But we started looking, we talked to her, we looked at other research and we said, "That has nothing to do with how they're competing. That's about the decision to compete or not." And if you think about it, unless you know you're a math genius, getting money for the problems you solve is probably the best strategy than competing against total strangers and risking walking away with nothing. The guys assumed they would win and the girls wanted data to know that they were going to win. And that's what the research has shown, which is that women are incredibly good at calculating their odds of success, and men are good at ignoring them. So that's the key. They will hold themselves out of the competition until they have more degrees before they apply for that job or they run for office. The key is not can they do it, but when they will.

**LT:** That is fascinating. I have to ask Ash, as you caused quite an uproar when you came out against programs like sports groups where every child gets a trophy. Why do you think programs like that are a bad idea?

**AM:** I hate them. And the more I talk about it and the more research I do, and I just go, "Yeah, I hate them." And I think it's because we need time and space to make mistakes. We need to be able to screw up. And it's okay. When we're giving kids constant trophies, I think what we're telling them is, "Failure is so terrible, we have to pretend that it didn't happen. Here is a trophy that you got anyway, you didn't deserve this, but it's okay because you are so wonderful, we're going to give you a trophy. You are innately a winner. You're always a winner." Well, remember when we started at the beginning about who's a bad winner and who's a bad loser.

**AM:** It's the person who thinks, "Innately, I deserve a trophy every time I come." And we're teaching kids this bad belief that they should never actually be honoring the person who actually was successful. There's real damage in setting yourself up for believing that you're perfect and that you have to get a claim and that you have to be recognized and you're not going to grow out of that because we've never given kids the space to do that. And I think we're seeing increases in difficulty in mental health because one of the aspects of the fear of failure is not being able to live up to your own reputation. And that one chills me every time I say it.

**AM:** I think that that's what a lot of kids are doing. And I think that that's the message that we're giving kids. Everybody has a trophy that they have to be wonderful every time.

**LT:** And the reality is that people are not wonderful every time. And people lose for all different reasons. Ash, when you look at winners - and winners across the board have sometimes lost - Abraham Lincoln lost elections until finally he won, Michael Phelps, the gold medal swimmer, also lost. How do these people lose? What do they do when they've lost? What separates them from other people?

**AM:** There's actually been some studies on the world's best, whether it's Olympics or people who've really succeeded in business or arts or different spheres. And they asked them, "Well, what gave you that big success?" And, actually, the most common thing was the big failure that happened

before the big success. We can't say that every time you're going to get a failure, then you're also going to follow up with this monster success. That doesn't happen. But what is the difference - and the thing that can help failure lead to that success? It was that those people were relentless about analyzing their loss. Where most people would say, "Oh, well just forget about it. Shake it off, put it behind you." The people who really benefited and came up with the big success, analyzed every single aspect of why they lost that other time. So they would never do it again.

**AM:** So I think that's the thing, is being able to take the emotion and the hurt, because losing hurts, especially if it's something you care about, that hurts. But you have to separate the emotion from the experience and then look at it almost like a doctor diagnosing a disease, "What are the things that went wrong? What can I do differently next time? This part still could go wrong, but what are the things, the techniques that I can use when things are going south? And how can I change that behavior?" So you're focusing on problem-solving and anticipating it so you're building your strength. Or you might say, "Wow, the reason I screwed that up was because I didn't know how to program a particular computer or I wasn't fast enough." So you can do some training for skills, but it's also about problem-solving in advance.

**AM:** And then that also gives you a sense of control. One of the things that champions believe is that, "I own this. I chose to be here." And once they have that sense of control, then that helps them feel like when things are going bad, "But I'm deciding to do this, this is up to me. So I shouldn't just be beaten by how I'm losing," and realize you're taking pride in ownership. And that self-confidence is also a key element of mental toughness. So when you have that setback, it's not going to be as catastrophic or scary as it might be otherwise.

**LT:** Ash, competition is always so stressful. Can you talk about the stress of competition and how people can thrive in competition?

**AM:** One of the things that I think is really fascinating is, as you said, it's always stressful, although we should go back for a second to the nature of stress. But when you're thinking about the competition as stressful, where we're comparing the stress of skydiving, hurdling through the air to potentially go splat versus ballroom dance competitions. And we thought, "Oh well, you know which one's more stressful?" And it turns out after the first skydive, which is very stressful, that you actually get habituated to it fairly quickly. Even within the same day, if you do multiple jumps, your cortisol response actually starts evening out significantly even by the third or fourth jump. But there was a study of ballroom dancers and they found that ballroom dancers who'd even done more than 170 competitions, had just as big a cortisol spike as the beginning dancers. So we don't habituate to competition because competition is always about social status.

**AM:** It's always about putting yourself out there and having people watch you and perform. And we care what other people think about us. Even those of us who say, "Oh, I don't care." Yeah, you do. [chuckle]

**AM:** At a certain level. It may not change what you do, but it doesn't mean you're oblivious to it. So I think that it's important to understand that competition is stressful. But then I mentioned going back to the nature of stress, and most people when they say, "Oh, I'm really stressed," they're not actually stressed, they are distressed. "I am anxious, I am upset, I'm sad," or, "I'm frustrated," I'm distressed, because stress doesn't have to automatically be a negative. Stress is that physiological engagement in response to something in your environment that you figure you have to do. "Oh,

there's somebody running after me," or, "Oh, I have to go compete for a promotion," or something like that.

**AM:** So there's something in the environment that is triggering that heart race or that butterflies in the stomach. But how you interpret it can be a positive or a negative. And the research also shows that there's not one right element of stress or not. Some people actually do their best when they're really stressed and fired up, but they're interpreting that stress in a positive way. Some people do need calm, they need to sit there with headphones and music and, "No one talk to me," and it'll be okay. And then there's a lot of people in the middle. So the right amount of stress for someone is going to be different and based on who you are individually. And some of this is life experience, some of it's even genetics. Extroverts tend to like more stress and introverts probably want less. So I think we need to focus on, it's not just trying to deal with stress, it's understanding how much stress is optimal for you and then shaping the environment around it so that you can do the best you can. If you're stressed and you're on a team, couple pro tips, get away from the team. [chuckle]

**AM:** Because stress is more contagious than the flu. And even if you do better on stress, the guy next to you may not necessarily. And if you see someone who is stressed, there was one survey that Harvard researchers did and it asked if you saw someone stressed, what would you do? 94% of us would tell them to calm down. That is the worst possible advice to give someone who is stressed. One, it's never worked. Someone tells you to calm down. Has that ever actually worked?

**LT:** No.

[laughter]

**AM:** You just get upset. Right? And that's the thing. We've actually done studies, when someone tells you to calm down, you actually bifurcate your attention. So you have the thing that you were stressed about and now you have to stress about the fact that you can't calm down. So your goal is to calm down, which means you're not paying attention to the thing that actually... You need to solve the problem. So now that may actually lead to worse performance. So the better advice is - you're not stressed, you're excited, interpret those butterflies in your stomach as a positive - that it means you care because we only get stressed about things we care about.

**LT:** I love that. Ash, what are the three takeaways you'd like to leave the audience with today?

**AM:** Well, the first is remember that competition is fun. It should be exciting. It's a way to test yourself. It's a way to learn if you're good at something and use that fun. If it's getting scary, then you're in this threat state. So, you want to reassess. So, competition should be something that should be pushing you to do your best, not something that pushes you to do your worst. The next thing, respecting your competition, respecting the difficulties and the challenges, I think, is crucially important. And it will actually help you perform better, not just deal with those setbacks. And finally, the lesson from those competitors, when you do have a setback, when you do have a failure, give yourself a couple days, if you need it a month or so to sort of wallow and eat some ice cream. But if you want to get over it, don't just pretend it never happened. Go back and diagnose that and look for problem-solving techniques so that you can be better the next time.

**LT:** Thank you, Ash, this has been wonderful. I really enjoyed your book 'Top Dog'.

**AM:** Thank you so much for having me. It was an honor.

[music]

**OUTRO male voice:** If you enjoyed today's episode and would like to receive the show notes or get new fresh weekly episodes, be sure to sign up for our newsletter at <https://www.3takeaways.com/> or follow us on [Instagram](#), [Twitter](#), [LinkedIn](#) and [Facebook](#). Note that 3Takeaways.com is with the number 3, 3 is not spelled out. See you soon at 3Takeaways.com (<https://www.3takeaways.com/>)

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