

## The Benefits of Grit with Steph Curry and JR Smith



I love basketball and keep my eye on many players in the NCAA and NBA. If you follow the NBA, you probably know that Steph Curry has been consistently overlooked and underrated from the time he first started playing. Steve Kerr, his current coach, tells a story of when Steph was at an NBA training camp, trying to attract attention before the draft. Curry's parents approached Kerr and asked if he thought their son had what it takes to make it in the NBA. When Kerr said that he thought their son did, the look of relief in their eyes was obvious. Even Steph's parents were worried that no one could see his talent. From overlooked and underrated, Steph Curry has become a key member of one of the NBA's most talented teams in the history of the

game. How did he manage to keep his confidence when very few people believed in him? Where did he find the internal drive to keep going when most teams and sponsors only saw him as a mid-level player? How can we duplicate what he has done in our own lives? I believe the answer is found through the practice of self-compassion.

At the end of a historic 2016 season the Warriors beat the Bull's long held record of 73 wins. It was an incredible achievement. Attempting to cap that season off with an NBA Championship, the Warriors played Lebron James and the Cavaliers to 7 games. Unfortunately, for the Warriors, they lost that final game in dramatic fashion. Steph did not play as well as he was expected to and, immediately following that painful loss, he answered a barrage of difficult questions about his personal performance. How he answered those questions gives us a look into his character as a player and an individual. Most of the questions that he faced were pointedly targeting his disappointing performance. Here is how he responded:

*I was aggressive but in the wrong ways . . . It will haunt me for a while because it means a lot to me to try to lead my team and do what I need to do on the court--on big stages. I've done it before. I didn't do it tonight. It will be good next year, coming back, kind of remembering this feeling and being an even better player (June 16, 2016 NBA Finals Game 7 Post Game Interview).*

There is no question that Steph is hurting from this loss, he openly admits it. He also admits that he did not perform his best. Yet even in this

moment, immediately after this tough loss, he is already framing his final outcome, “It will be good next year, coming back . . . being an even better player.” Two things are happening here. Steph is not stuck in the moment seeing only failure. The opinions of all these reporters, questioning his abilities under pressure, means very little to him. He understands he fell short. But he is not letting his performance in this series define him as a player. He’s not happy about it, but he is already looking closely at where he can improve. He is convinced that this mistake will make him better. Second, he is extending compassion to himself for the loss. He isn’t shying away from his responsibility to lead his team. Nor is he beating himself up for his inability to do it at this particular time. If you watch the interview, you can see the fire in his eyes. The will to succeed and the confidence to match his desire is still there even moments after such a tough loss..

Contrast this moment, the loss of the NBA championship, to JR Smith’s reaction in game one of the NBA finals in 2018. Let’s all recognize that Smith is an incredible athlete and a key contributor to his team, who won the NBA title in 2016. His example is compelling because JR Smith is such an important member of his team, his reaction to this incident was also widely broadcast, and the media approached both Steph Curry and him in a similar fashion. While we compare these two events, try to offer JR the same level of compassion we all hope for. As you look at this critique of JR try to see how you have acted in ways similar way to him. Only by seeing our common humanity in the imperfections that we all share, can we truly deal with the fallout of our shortcomings. Based on the reactions by social media, sports news and television broadcasters, many people were blaming JR for the loss of this first game. Was it a tough loss? Absolutely. Could you argue that it was

his fault entirely? Some did. Was he ready to face his critics and process his involvement with this loss on a public stage? I don't think so.

First, Smith changes his story about what he thought was going on. He claims he knew the game was tied but footage shows him saying, "I thought we were ahead." He says, "I thought LeBron was going to call a timeout." He says, "I didn't have a good shot." What he does not say is, "I really messed up. I'm better than this." And own his mistake. I think we can all relate to his responses. I know I have tried to hide from mistakes in my past, and I suspect there will be bad moments in my future, where I fail to do the right thing again.

Now I can't tell you that I know exactly what JR was thinking as he was getting publicly called out for this painful mistake but I can tell you what I see. From my own experience with this kind of failure, and the experience I have with coaching others, I see a guy who is silently eviscerating himself. He is so filled with self-hatred, anger, and shame in this moment that there is no room for him to publicly accept responsibility for his actions.

A day later, when Smith was interviewed again, he still had not recovered:

*After thinking about it a lot, I can't say I was sure of anything. . . That's pretty much who I've been my whole life. I've always been the one guy who's the butt of the jokes, or the one guy who does something crazy that everyone will look at. I've been that way my whole life and it looks like that's gonna be the way it's gonna continue to be (ESPN Interview).*

That interview is hard to watch. The pain that JR Smith is feeling is palpable. You can see from the way he is talking that he is hurting and he's still unable to fully own the situation. I'm willing to bet that JR's internal dialogue is not suitable for the ears of children under 18. Think about what you say to yourself when you make big mistakes. If you're like most people that will be a very harsh conversation. I believe that in this moment Smith unconsciously chooses to react differently than Curry did. First, he lets the frustration of his teammates and the media influence how he views himself. He swallows their narrative that he's a failure. Sports commentator Stephen A. says, "That is as inexcusable a mistake as you can possibly make." JR is allowing that kind of talk define him as a player and a person. Second, he is telling himself that he's always been, "the one guy who's the butt of the jokes." Because of this, he does not have the emotional bandwidth to openly admit his pain and accept full responsibility for his actions. He offers himself no compassion or forgiveness. Did he have a lapse of judgement? Absolutely. Does that make him a failure? Never. However, Smith takes what is a significant mistake and gives it new meaning. He gives this error the power to define him as a complete failure. He holds that bitter scene in his mind and replays it over and over, telling himself, "This is who I am." It's too much for anyone to deal with. This mistake has become something that, without help, he may carry for the rest of his life.

Now, imagine if he decided to ignore the talking heads. Stay solid in his belief that he brings value to his team and practice self compassion. He might have thought, "Wow, I really messed up. I'm so embarrassed by this. I wish I had taken the shot when I had it. This is only one game. I have been instrumental to our team in the past and I will get better because of this." Speaking like this would project to his teammates that he understands the

gravity of his mistake and it would likely alleviate much of the distrust and anger that was directed at him. It would connect him to everyone. We all make mistakes. We all need forgiveness. Embracing our mistakes allows us to move past our worst moments. Sadly, many of us habitually tear ourselves apart when we slip up. In our minds, errors increase in significance because we cannot face them. We spend huge amounts of energy trying to distance ourselves from embarrassment, frustration, and disappointment. Our attempts to avoid our follies causes us to ruminate. We become stuck and life challenges evolve into deep shame, personal hatred, and loss of trust in ourselves. We allow others to define us because we are actually more angry with ourselves than they are. We feel we deserve their anger.

People often believe that if they don't beat themselves up, they will become unproductive, willing to let everything slide. The opposite of this is true. The more we beat ourselves up, the more we pull away from the problem. We are less likely to learn from the experience because close inspection is too painful through the lens of self-incrimination. Consequently, we are more likely to repeat our missteps.

When you slip up, how do you treat yourself? Are you able to offer yourself forgiveness? Do you acknowledge your pain and extend comfort? Or are you like so many of us who tear ourselves to shreds, promising never to do it again? Next time you mess up, try speaking kindly to yourself and see how it opens you to the possibility of moving forward. Watch how your ability to admit fault eases the frustration of those around you. Then dive into why you made that mistake and feel the power it brings as you create a plan to come back better than before.