Received: November 7, 2025 | Accepted: January 7, 2026 | https://doi.org/10.65832/mrlhycdb

The Humble Athlete: Why They Are Needed and How to Create Them

By Jeremy Carter, NSCA-CSCS*D, ACSM-EP
True Performance Realization

Keywords: Leadership; Athletic Development; Learning; Growth

Abstract

Leadership is critical in high-performing organizations. One often misunderstood and underemphasized trait of leadership is humility. Humility is not weakness, timidness, or passivity. Humility enables growth, learning, resiliency, experimentation, and many other needed traits of successful athletes, teams, and organizations. The purpose of this article is to describe what humility is, how humility is a strength, and provide a framework on how to implement humility into your athletes, teams, and organizations.

Introduction

When our society talks about athletes, we commonly employ words such as *talented*, *gifted*, *showman*, *closer*, and *clutch* when they are winning. When these same athletes are not scoring, placing, or record setting, society uses words such as *has been*, *overrated*, *mistake*, or worse nouns and adjectives. Western society has developed a relatively narrow focus on a few, summarizing, or outcome metrics to determine an athlete's value. However, if you have the privilege to work with, develop, and mentor athletes, better words that you should strive to have your athletes described as are *driven*, *empowered*, *committed*, *resilient*, *pursuing*, and *humble*. The purpose of this article is to describe why leaders should instill humility in our athletes, teams, and organizations, which will lead to greater results on and off the field.

Humility

When one thinks of the modern athlete, humility is unlikely to come to mind. Using football as an example, how often do we see a player engage in a rehearsed celebration by themselves following a touchdown, where they insultingly fail to acknowledge their fellow teammates who helped them score? It is typically this same kind of athlete who is upset when they do not score in a game, even if their team wins. The inability to see the bigger picture of the team's success and then embrace it is a tip off to a lack of humility. Amy Morin shares that mentally strong people do not resent the success of others.[1] Therefore, we begin to see that humility is associated with increased mental toughness.

Humility is often misunderstood and mostly underemphasized; however, humility is needed for growth, learning, and resiliency. Humility is central to leadership, facilitates self-accountability, enables openness to external feedback, and is ultimately self-awareness—of one's strengths, weaknesses, and role within the larger picture. Humility is not being timid, weak, non-driven, or complacent,[2] despite a long history of association with such misclassified traits. Hayes and Comer state that humility "has incorrectly evolved to mean having a low estimate of one's importance, worthiness, or merits."[3]

> *"Humility isn't thinking less of yourself but thinking of yourself less."*
>
> —C. S. Lewis

Notably, the opposite of humility is "entitlement, pride,

and self-centeredness," which has destroyed "individuals, teams, and organizations."[4] The moment an athlete elevates themselves above the team and organization, they are showcasing their entitlement, pride, and self-centeredness. As was once told to the author by a United States Marine combat leader, "Wants become needs; needs become expectations; expectations become entitlement." This combat leader expressed that entitled individuals or organizations fail to live up to their potential.

Humility is an essential strength; it particularly "showcases moral strength" and is ultimately a demonstration of self-awareness.[5] John Maxwell believes that the lack of self-awareness is the reason why many leaders and organizations fail.[6] Since a leader needs both humility and confidence to inspire up, down, and throughout the team, we should not treat humility and confidence as if they are "at opposite ends of the spectrum."[7] Jim Collins believe that the highest leaders are "humble and fearless,"[8] while Patrick Lencioni conveys that the ideal team player is humble, hungry (i.e., driven, committed, determined), and smart (i.e., emotional intelligence), with humility being "the single greatest and most indispensable attribute of being a team player."[9]

Amer Kaissi's excellent book, *Humbitious: The Power of Low-Ego, High-Drive Leadership*, expertly demonstrates how one can be both ambitious and humble.[10] James Kerr believes that "successful leaders balanced pride with humility; absolute pride in performance; total humility before the magnitude of the task."[11] Markedly, humble athletes have ambition for the team and organization, whereas selfish athletes have ambition for themselves.

Trust may not be something that we automatically associate with humility and its long-term benefits, but it should be. Stephen Covey believes that trust is "the one thing that changes everything" in an organization.[12] When athletes are not humble, the team cannot expect their efforts to be anything other than self-serving, which destroys trust, tempo, and comaraderie. Furthermore, humility is associated with many aspects of leadership.[13] As leadership within an organization is tied to various metrics of success (e.g., performance, retention, discretionary effort), we note that humility is foundational to continued success.

"One of the most common myths about leadership is that arrogant, overconfident, and even narcissistic individuals are better leaders . . . It's very clear: self-centered leaders do not achieve success in the long term . . . It is humility that leads to higher performance."

—Amer Kaissi

The "Growth-Vulnerability Curve" (taken from previous works)[14] demonstrates that

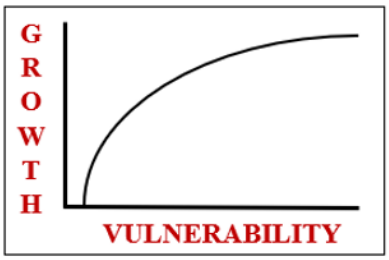


Figure 1: Growth-Vulnerability Curve.

growth does not immediately occur in a new relationship (i.e., a coaching-athlete relationship), rather there is a lag, due to a level of trust needing to be cultivated between the leader and the led. "Once a level of vulnerability via trust is established between the leader and led, growth can occur.[15] When athletes, coaches, and organizations lack humility, it is extremely difficult to be vulnerable, as the lack of humility is associated with a zero-defect mentality (i.e., no mistakes are allowed). Thus, "vulnerability is needed for the growth of our subordinates/followers, which demands humble leadership."[16]

To the critic who believes that an overdeveloped, self-serving ego is beneficial to an athlete or team, let us briefly mention one of the greatest basketball players of all time, Michael Jordan, a six-time champion in the National Basketball Association (NBA). When you read the books *Jordan Rules*[17] and *Unguarded*[18] or watch the documentary *The Last Dance*,[19] it becomes evident that Jordan led primarily through coercive measures, which is classified as deceptive leadership.[20] It might

be easy to state Jordan was trying to lead his team to greatness for the purposes of the team (altruism). However, his personal trainer (Tim Grover) writes in his book that when he began training Jordan's teammates, Jordan said "I don't pay you to train me, I pay you not to train anyone else"[21] with *anyone else* including his own teammates.

Without a doubt, Michael Jordan's mentality led to personal greatness, but the greatness of the Chicago Bulls came from the collective effort of others. Among those others is Coach Phil Jackson. Coach Jackson's leadership and recognition that Jordan could not lead the team alone ultimately facilitated the legacy of the Chicago Bulls and Michael Jordan. This is because the Bulls never won a championship until Coach Jackson made Bill Cartwright the team's co-captain, followed by Scottie Pippen as the team's co-captain.[22] If Jordan, who is arguably one of the best basketball players of all time, could not rely on his ego to win championships, then we cannot place our bid for success in self-serving pride either.

Therefore, we must view humility as the strength that it truly is. Of considerable note, Jordan's self-serving mentality is far different than that of the legendary NBA player Bill Russell, who won eleven NBA titles and whom Sam Walker credits as the catalyst behind the Boston Celtics success, due to Russell's humble leadership.[23] Figure 2 demonstrates prominent differences between non-humble and humble athletes. The description of humble athletes necessarily discludes traits such as passivity, timidity, and weakness.

"My ego demands—for myself—the success of my team."
—Bill Russell

How to Cultivate Humility

A unique aspect of the True Performance Realization Model is the DEMAC [Define, Emphasize, Measure, Acknowledge, and Correct] Approach, which is highly useful in changing issues typically classified as intangible, such as culture.[24] Summarized, to change a behavior, you have to clearly define and emphasize what you desire, consistently measure what you value, and acknowledge and correct behaviors that you want or do not want, respectively. Therefore, to stimulate humility, you must first clearly define what *humility* is to your organization—and why it is important.

Following the establishment of a unifying definition, you must emphasize it consistently and meaningfully, with constant measurements (i.e., record when athletes fail to be humble, and when they succeed in it). Regarding acknowledgement (of correct behaviors) and correction (of incorrect behaviors), the responses must be "genuine, timely, and appropriate."[25] Of the utmost importance regarding corrections, Kotter shares that

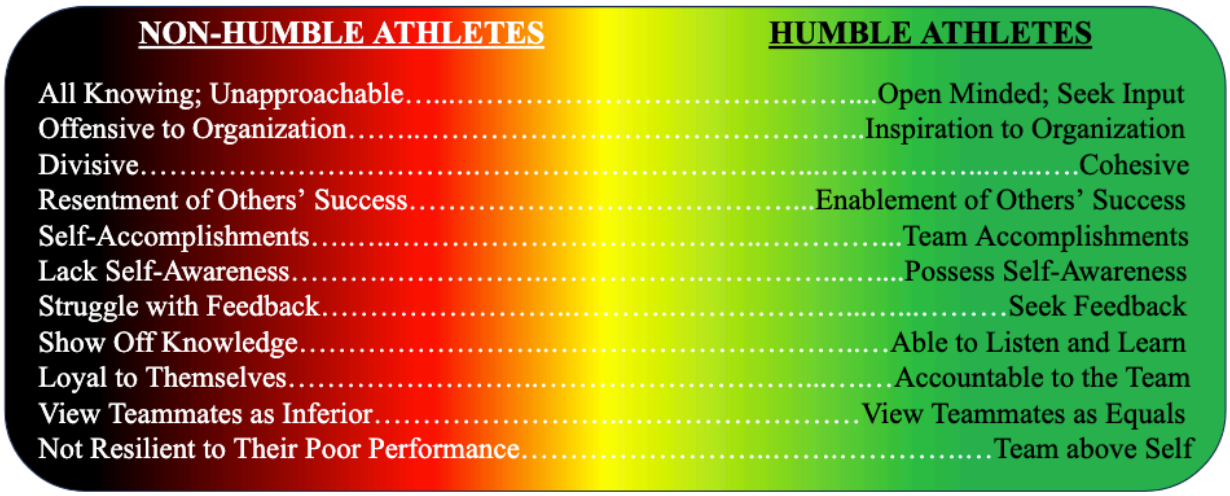


Figure 2: Traits of Non-Humble and Humble Athletes.

Trait	Definition	Methods	Measure
Trait 1	Definiton	Method 1A	Measure 1A.1
			Measure 1A.2
		Method 1B	Measure 1B.1
			Measure 1B.2
			Measure 1B.3
		Method 1C	Measure 1C.1
			Measure 1C.2

Table 1: Blank Example of Applying the DEMAC Approach.

complacency is the number-one error made when it comes to failed efforts to create organizational change.[26] As emphasized by General Mattis (United States Marine Corps, retired), "Attitudes are caught, not taught."[27]

Table 1, based on previous works by the author, provides a basic example for how to use the DEMAC Approach within your organization for perceived intangible traits.[28] As you are determining the definition, methods, and way to measure any intangible traits, you should use active language and avoid passive language. An example of active language is *we need to improve*; an example of passive language is *improvement is needed*.

Table 2 provides a practical example of how to apply the DEMAC Approach for stimulating humility in a football team. There are several takeaways from Table 2, with the most important being the definition of humility. While the reader should make their own definition of humility within their organization, the reader can clearly see that the proposed definition would unify, drive, and grow the individual athlete, the collective athletes, the team, and the organization.

Using Measure 1A.2 (giving max effort in each play during the game, regardless of the score, play, or situation), we can see that if a self-centered wide receiver did not put full effort into blocking for a running play, via the DEMAC approach, we can enable the positive change for this behavior through a structured process. Using Measure 1B.2 (understanding when you are supporting a fellow teammate (i.e., make them better), and when a fellow teammate is supporting you (i.e., be grateful), if the starting tight end is not holding the blocking pad optimally for his replacement during blocking drills, we can optimally change this behavior through a meaningful framework (i.e., DEMAC Approach). Using 1C.2 (not resting on past performance or accomplishments), we can see that if a star quarterback is continuing to work hard in the offseason, we should immediately acknowledge his commitment via the DEMAC Approach to ensure that we cultivate these actions. Lastly, note that the measurements must be repeatedly observable throughout the off-, pre-, and in-seasons.

Final Thoughts

An arrogant competitor is cocky while winning, whereas a humble competitor has a composed bearing in successful moments. A self-centered competitor blames others when losing, meanwhile a humble competitor is observing, learning, and adapting while they are losing. An entitled competitor is fragile to adversity, while a humble competitor seeks challenges. A self-serving competitor is divisive in times of stress, whereas a humble competitor is cohesive in times of pressure.

An entitled competitor's identity is in success, whereas a humble competitor's identity is in growth and pursuing the next peak. Ego-centric athletes believe that they are good already, however humble athletes know that they can always improve. Of note, confident-humble competitors are not surprised when they are dominating, as they expect to dominate due to their humble preparation. Finally, if you are the athlete or work with the athlete(s) who uses self-serving ego and personal pride to fuel your/their drive (which has been done by legendary athletes, such as Michael Jordan), be cocky in execution, but humble

Trait	Definition	Methods	Measure
Humility	Ambitiously, relentlessly, and constantly putting the team first, in all of actions, on and off the field.	**Method 1A:** Selfless Max Effort	**Measure 1A.1:** Giving max effort in strength, conditioning, film, and practice sessions, regardless of role.
			Measure 1A.2: Giving max effort in each play during the game, regardless of the score, play, or situation.
			Measure 1A.3: Respecting and learning from those above you; teaching and growing those below you.
	Believing and acting that no task is too big or too small for anyone to accomplish to drive our team forward.	**Method 1B:** Selfless Work	**Measure 1B.1:** No trash in the locker room, weight room, film room, or practice field at the end of the day.
			Measure 1B.2: Understanding when you are supporting a fellow teammate (i.e., make them better), and when a fellow teammate is supporting you (i.e., be grateful).
	Knowing your own strengths and weaknesses, while working daily and diligently to exploit your strengths and improve your weaknesses.		**Measure 1B.3:** Managing envrionment for effectiveness; all weights racked, equipment stored, and chairs in the preassigned locations.
		Method 1C: Daily and Deliberate Improvement	**Measure 1C.1:** Seeking, receiving, and implementing feedback on how to improve.
			Measure 1C.2: Not resting on past performance or accomplishments.

Table 2: Humility Example of Applying the DEMAC Approach to a Football Team.

in preparation, as humility facilitates learning and growth.

Conclusion

While our society misclassifies and underemphasizes humility within athletics, by instilling humility in our athletes, we can increase their performance both on and off the field. George Washington believed the order was: listen, learn, help, then lead.[29] James Kerr states that "humility allows us to ask a simple question: how can we do this better?"[30] Put another way, emphasize humility and you are emphasizing resiliency, learning, and leadership.

Author Biography

Jeremy Carter (featured right) is the Founder, Owner, and President of True Performance Realization (TPR), and serves as the Editor-in-Chief for the *TPR Applied Journal*. With over eighteen years of experience in human performance, Jeremy has earned numerous certifications, including the National Strength and Conditioning Association (NSCA) Strength and Conditioning Specialist with Distinction and the American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) Certified Exercise Physiologist. He is a current reviewer for the NSCA's *Strength and Conditioning Journal* (*SCJ*), a founding member and editor for the *Journal of Sport and Human Performance*, and a recipient of the NSCA's *SCJ*'s 2023 Editorial Excellence Award.



References

1. Amy Morin, *13 Things Mentally Strong People Don't Do: Take Back Your Power, Embrace Change, Face Your Fears, and Train Your Brain for Happiness and Success* (NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2014), 162–79.
2. Jeremy Carter, "A Critical and Devastating Gap in Our Leadership Traits, Principles, Evaluations, Ethos, and Culture: The Problem with Solutions," *Marine Corps Gazette* 108, no. 7 (2024): 66–73.
3. Merwyn A. Hayes, Michael D. Comer, *Start With Humility: Lessons from America's Quiet CEOs on How to Build Trust and Inspire Followers* (Merwyn A. Hayes and Michael D. Comer, 2010).
4. "A Critical and Devastating Gap in Our Leadership Traits, Principles, Evaluations, Ethos, and Culture."
5. Ibid.
6. John C. Maxwell, *The Self-Aware Leader: Play to Your Strengths and Unleash Your Team* (NY: HarperCollins Leadership, 2021), IX.
7. *Start With Humility.*

8. Jim Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap and Others Don't* (NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001).
9. Patrick Lencioni, *The Ideal Team Player: How to Recognize and Cultivate the Three Essential Virtues: A Leadership Fable* (Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass, 2016).
10. Amer Kaissi, *Humbitious: The Power of Low-Ego, High-Drive Leadership* (Canada: Page Two, 2021).
11. James Kerr, *Legacy: What the All Blacks Can Teach Us About the Business of Life* (London: Constable, 2015), 3.
12. Stephen M. R. Covey, *The Speed of Trust: The One Thing That Changes Everything* (NY: Free Press, 2018), 1.
13. "A Critical and Devastating Gap in Our Leadership Traits, Principles, Evaluations, Ethos, and Culture."
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Sam Smith, *The Jordan Rules: The Inside Story of One Turbulent Season with Michael Jordan and the Chicago Bulls* (NY: Gallery Books, 2020).
18. Scottie Pippen, with Michael Arkush, *Unguarded* (NY: Atria Books, 2021).
19. Jason Hehir, "The Last Dance" (Bristol, CT: ESPN, 2012).
20. Jeremy Carter, "Deceptive Leadership in Our Corps: Guidance for Our Newest Leaders," *Marine Corps Gazette* (Accepted).
21. Tim S. Grover, *Relentless: From Good to Great to Unstoppable* (NY: Scribner, 2013), 40.
22. Sam Walker, *The Captain Class: The Hidden Force that Creates the World's Greatest Teams* (NY: Random House, 2017), 246–54.
23. Ibid, 36, 40, 41, 90.
24. Jeremy Carter, "Achieving the Culture We Pursue: The DEMAC Approach," *Marine Corps Gazette* (February, 2026): WE11–WE16.
25. Ibid.
26. John P. Kotter, *Leading Change* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2012), 4.
27. Jim Mattis, with Bing West, *Call Sign Chaos: Learning to Lead* (New York: Random House, 2019), 81, 159.
28. "Achieving the Culture We Pursue: The DEMAC Approach."
29. *Call Sign Chaos*, 17.
30. *Legacy*, 15.



What if Sisyphus, punished by the gods to roll a boulder uphill for eternity, did not view the punishment as a curse? What if Sisyphus viewed it as a challenge, a pursuit? If Sisyphus had a different perspective, would each day not be a condemnation to endure, but a challenge to overcome?

For a different perspective on preparation and performance, contact True Performance Realization at:
president@trueperformancerealization.com

https://www.trueperformancerealization.com/

Artwork by A. Asfar