

# Who Are You When You're NOT Working?

## *Enjoy Your Off-Season*

The injured high school player came off the court with blood streaming from a cut across the corner of his eye. The coach took one look at him and shouted, "That's two feet from your heart. Get back in there and play!"

The player grabbed a towel, mopped the stream of red from his forehead, and trotted back onto the court. Taking his place along the free throw lane, he flinched at the pain, and then lunged for the rebound. They needed him, and he didn't intend to let his buddies down.

While this coach's comment may have been motivating to the eighteen-year-old, it may not have been the smartest thing to do for his long-term health. However 38-year-olds, 48-year-olds, and 58-year-olds are still making the same decisions.

According to a recent poll published in *Fast Company* (2004), half of all Americans work more than 50 hours a week. One-fourth of all US workers take no vacation days at all. They work at their job until they're physically spent. But because they feel needed, they're motivated to overwork until they burnout and lose everything—their job, their health, their relationships, and their spiritual focus.

Ball players, coaches, and team owners understand the importance of an off-season to prevent burnout. But the off-season serves other purposes as well: Exploring other talents and interests. "Catching up" in their lives—to socialize, to take difficult courses and "get them out of the way" of their busy season. Investigating their options for the future. In fact, what they do during the off-season may be the most important part of their overall career longevity and lifetime earning power. Typically, it's during the off-season that they negotiate new business deals, set up other financial investments and partnerships, and take care of their agent relationships. And, of course, they rest and give injuries time to heal as well.

All workers—whatever their game—need an off-season. As a country, we're just now discovering how badly we need that off-season. What you do with your own personal downtime will determine your satisfaction and success during the regular season and over a lifetime.

**Stay in shape physically.** A pastor friend of mine fondly warns members of his congregation: "God told us to rest one day a week. You can do it like he said, or you can wind up taking your days all in a row—in the hospital." It's worth a note in passing, however, that rest doesn't necessarily mean to stop all activity. For you, it may simply mean the relaxation that comes from a change of pace.

But rest is not all that's involved in taking care of ourselves physically. In season, an athlete stays in shape by training, discipline, and diet, as well as proper sleep. In the off-season, they add a different component to the mix: more attention to injuries and corrective surgeries, and less discipline regarding training, diet, and sleep.

The need to stay physically fit doesn't disappear. Players don't expect to gain 50 pounds during the few months of off-season business and entertaining and then be back in shape in a couple of weeks when the season starts. They maintain the discipline of general physical fitness year around.

To enjoy your work for the long term, you have to do the same. Your schedule and hours have to be reasonable enough to allow you to stay physically fit.

**Get financially fit.** Smart athletes manage their money well and invest wisely during their years of high-earning potential so that they can maintain their standard of living when they retire from the game. Financial fitness is less about income than outgo.

To be physically fit, focus on what you keep as well as what you earn. Rather than working head down day after day after day after day, you need an off-season to set your financial house in order and keep the lawn well maintained. Even the wealthiest individuals don't just turn things over to a brokerage house or money manager and walk away. They keep an eye on what's happening in the world and how that might affect their investments.

"A pretentious, showy life is an empty life; a plain and simple life is a full life," according to the Proverbs. A saner lifestyle affects your finances by shrinking your outgo. Then with the outgo under control, you can set about investing the income well.

No matter how large or small your income, you need time to educate yourself about financial matters: your personal net worth, insurance issues, estate planning and wills, investing, giving. You'll need to read, listen to financial TV networks, and stay up to date on new laws and how they affect you.

Some people spend such long hours making their money that they have no time or energy left over to figure out how to manage it. At the least, you'll need a quarterly off-season and an annual off-season to stay financially fit.

**Grow your intellectual capital.** Marriages often split when one partner wakes up one morning and decides he or she has "outgrown" the other. Yes, love commits to stay regardless. But how much happier the scene when both persons use their off-season to pursue projects that stimulate them intellectually and make them a more interesting person: reading, attending a class, learning a new skill, pursuing a hobby, meeting with friends in study groups. Proverbs says, "An intelligent person is always eager to take in more truth; fools feed on fast-food fads and fancies."

An extra benefit, of course, is that this off-season growth deepens your expertise and broadens your opportunity for career advancement.

**Keep your social game intact.** In his international *bestseller Emotional Intelligence*, Daniel Goleman discusses the limited future of individuals, no matter how high their IQ, who lack innate interpersonal skills (what he dubbed their EQ, emotional quotient). My work as a consultant to Fortune 500 companies during the past 24 years substantiates the same limitations. University recruiters have understood the principle for years, preferring to give scholarships to B students with broad interests and many activities during high school, rather than to A students focused solely on their academic work.

Even Jesus took time out of his brief three-year mission on earth to socialize. The Bible records several instances where he attended weddings, funerals, and meals at the homes of friends.

When work becomes so all consuming that your social calendar centers totally around work relationships and obligations, your quality of life will suffer. Inevitably, work friends talk about work. And if there's stress from an issue at work, that stress will spill over into your social conversations so that you can't get away from the problem even after hours. You need the stimulation of friends involved in other pursuits and interests. They share a different perspective and pace.

Todd Szalkowski talks of how he has rounded out his life to enjoy his off-season: "I used to work 12 hours a day routinely. Now I come in to work at 7:15 and leave at 5:15. I coach my kids in their sports teams. My marriage is stronger. I'm more active at church... I've always had a

desire to make God the center of my life, but I'd just never taken the steps to carry it out. Of course, I'm still available to clients by cell. But once I put my time and money in order, everything else fell in place."

Take note when your friends stop calling. Ask yourself how long it has been since you hosted guests for dinner. When these other relationships fall by the wayside, your life is careening out of balance. You need a longer off-season.

To enjoy the game of work, guard your off-season. While it's nice to feel perpetually needed on the court, it's nicer to feel physically rested, financially fit, and personally well-rounded in your pursuits.

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