

PEAK PERFORMANCE UNDER STRESS

Stress is a direct result of an athlete or team focusing on, and trying to control the “uncontrolables” within their sport (i.e., officiating, play of opponents, playing conditions, crowd, etc.). When an athlete focuses on these uncontrollables he/she is more likely to tighten up and “choke.” The following are some brief guidelines to follow to help you train your athletes to better manage competitive stress.

ONE

COACH THE PROCESS, NOT THE OUTCOME

When an athlete focuses on the importance of the game, winning and losing, or anything to do with the outcome of the performance, he/she is in big trouble. This focus distracts the athlete from a performance focus, tightens them up physically and insures that play will be tight and tentative. Get your athletes to focus on specifically what they have to do to win, not on winning.

TWO

TEACH AN AWARENESS OF THE STRESS/PERFORMANCE CURVE

If you can help your athletes understand the relationship between their level of nervousness and how well they perform you will have taken a major step towards helping them to better handle pressure. If an athlete can “read” their nervousness preperformance and can tell the difference between “good”, “bad”, and “not enough” nervous, then they will be in a better position to be able to do something about their arousal level before it's too late.

THREE

TEACH COPING SKILLS DON'T WASTE YOUR TIME YELLING AT YOUR ATHLETES TO “RELAX”

This is not how to teach relaxation. Instead, spend a small amount of time preseason providing your athletes with a number of mental skills that they can use to help them to better relax under pressure. Not all members of your team will need these, but you'll do far more good than not by investing a small amount of practice time offering 2-3 relaxation techniques (progressive muscle relaxation, autogenic training, breathing exercises, etc.) to everyone. Armed with ways of cooling down, your athletes will be less likely to fall apart under stress.

FOUR

TEACH REFRAMING IN PRACTICE

Reframe adversity teaches your athletes how to use whatever adversity comes their way to boost confidence rather than erode it. Help your players see that poor weather conditions, bad call by the officials, unsportsmanlike play, fatigue, etc., can work for them. There is always an advantage in a disadvantage. Train your players to find it.



FIVE

USE HUMOUR

The surest way to get your athletes to tighten up and play poorly is by being too serious. Peak performance comes out of having fun. You play your very best when you are enjoying the competition; regardless of the level. By using humor as a coach, you can help your at-athletes stay loose, keep the game in perspective and perform like champions. An athlete that is too serious is an at-athletes who has a tendency to choke under pressure.

SIX

PROVIDE A PERSPECTIVE

If you make the competition “bigger than life” your athletes’ performances will suffer. If the game is built up too much, or if that “must win” situation becomes too important, then chances are you will not get a good game from your team. Helping in helping them handle a highly pressured situation. An athlete that chokes usually has lost his/her perspective and made the competition much too important.

SEVEN

USE SIMULATION DAILY

Practice does not make perfect, perfect practice makes perfect. It's the quality of your practices that is ultimately responsible for how much your athletes get from practice tune and how well they handle highly pressured situations. Integrate competitive elements into your practices to help your athletes better adjust to the actual pressure of game day. The more your practices resemble competitions, the less chance your athletes will have of falling apart under pressure. If your athletes have trouble with bad calls, certain playing conditions, being down early, etc., simulate these elements as closely as possible in your practices.

EIGHT

CREATE A GO-FOR-IT ATMOSPHERE

In practice create an atmosphere of “nothing to lose” or “free to fail”. When athletes are not concerned about making mistakes they perform their best. If your players are worrying about messing up they will be distracted enough and tight enough to indeed mess up. Encourage your players to let their mistakes go immediately and to focus on what they want to have happen, not what they are afraid will happen. Reward mistakes when an athlete has truly gone for it, when they have given a winning effort. If you can teach your athletes to become oblivious to failure and mistakes (i.e., that they learn from them and that they are useful only for feedback on how to improve), then they will perform well for you.

NINE

SEPERATE SELF-WORTH FROM PERFORMANCE

At every level of play, athletes get stressed out when they attach their self worth to the quality of their performance (i.e., “I played well so therefore I am a winner”, “I was awful and therefore I am a not a good person”). You set the tone for this in how you coach and interact to your athletes. Do not make the mistake of equating their performance with how you feel about them. If you do not make this separation, then they will not be able to understand and their performance will suffer. If your ego is on the line every time you compete you have a lot to lose. When you play with a lot to lose, you will most likely get stressed out and play poorly.

TEN

CHALLENGE YOUR ATHLETES, DON'T THREATEN THEM

When an athlete or team is threatened with consequences should they not perform well, they will consistently fall apart when the game is on the line. Threats only serve to distract the athlete from the task at hand and get them to worry about the consequences for failure. Focusing on the “what if’s” of losing is the last thing you want your athletes to do before and during an important game. Instead, challenge them. Give them the message, which is implicit in any challenge that you think that they can do it, that you believe in them. Athletes will most frequently rise to your challenges and respond poorly or inconsistently to your threats.

ELEVEN

FOCUS YOUR ATHLETES FOR PEAK PERFORMANCE UNDER PRESSURE

Most stress related performance problems are a direct result of faulty concentration. The athlete that gets easily psyched out or intimidated does so because he or she is focusing on the wrong things (i.e., the actual or imagined prowess of the other player or team). Help your athletes concentrate on specifically what they have to do to compete well. Teach them to “control their eyes and ears”, to only look at, or listen to things that keep them composed and performing at their best.

