

Chapter 9
HANDLING THE
PRESSURE OF
COMPETITION



Maintaining Your
Composure When it
Counts

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Maintaining Your Composure When it Counts

All of us get knocked down, but it's the resiliency that really matters. All of us do well when things are going well, but the thing that distinguishes athletes is the ability to do well in times of great stress, urgency and pressure.

Roger Staubach, Former NFL Quarterback

I try to make pressure and tension work for me. I want the adrenaline to be flowing. I think sometimes we try so hard to be cool, calm and collected that we forget what we're doing. There's nothing wrong with being charged up if it's controlled.

Hale Irwin, PGA Golfer

Pressure creates tension, and when you're tense, you want to get your task over and done with as fast as possible. The more you hurry in golf, the worse you probably will play, which leads to even heavier pressure and greater pressure. To avoid this vicious circle, I'll take a couple of deep breaths and quickly review why I'm doing what I'm doing. Basically, I'm doing it because, win or lose, I enjoy playing golf and competing. This usually eases any mental tension I'm feeling by re-establishing my perspective on victory and defeat in relation to life in the whole.

Jack Nicklaus, PGA Golfer

It is one week before Juniors and Amanda is both excited and nervous about the competition. She is excited because she is swimming exceptionally well. She has good feel in the water and seems to be swimming almost effortlessly in practice. Her fitness level is at an all time high. However, she is overly anxious as she has never been able to perform well when it really seems to matter. During practice, she is one of the best in the water. And, when swimming against lesser opponents or in competitions where the outcome is of little importance, she always swims well. During "high pressure situations," however, Amanda doubts her ability to perform and tightens up both physically and mentally. Unfortunately, Amanda doesn't know what to do to deal with these negative reactions to pressure situations. So, true to form, Amanda performed at Juniors as she had expected--well below her capabilities.

This scenario illustrates what, unfortunately, is a somewhat common occurrence in competitive athletics. Athletes who perform exceptionally well in practice--setting personal, national, and even world records when the only pressure is that which they bring upon themselves. But, when it really matters most, these athletes are often unable to perform up to their capabilities. What changes from

practice to competition, both internally and externally, that can explain this change in performance? Furthermore, is there anything athletes can do to maintain a high level of performance regardless of the situation or inherent pressure? These questions will be answered in the following chapter but, first, take the Self-Assessment on the next page to see how you tend to respond when “the pressure is on.”

Pressure Changes From Practice to Competition

As mentioned, some athletes can perform flawlessly in practice but, when competition rolls around, they are unable to attain this same performance level. What really changes from practice to competition that might account for such performance changes?

Externally

In the external environment, many things are different between training and competition, such as:

1. Fans/family/friends watching you perform
2. Opponents that you must compete against
3. Scoreboard, judges, referees--all indicating that your performance “counts”
4. Media, cameras
5. Team selection based on your performance outcome

These are some of the real differences in the external environment of competition. As an athlete, you need to prepare for and learn to contend with these potential distracters in the environment--distracters that can take you out of your ideal preparation and performance. Keep in mind that these distracters are often out of your control so you probably won't be able to change them or get rid of them **but you can learn how to manage them**. At the same time, remember that a lot in the competitive environment remains the same, such as the length of the pool, number of lanes, and basic demands of the event. You must therefore remind yourself that what matters **most** (what you need to do to perform) remains consistent from practice to competition.

Internally

There are also many internal changes that take place between practice and competition. Think for a minute about the differences in how you think and feel in these different settings. First, your body probably responds differently to competition with changes such as a racing heart, increased sweating, and butterflies in your stomach. You probably have different things going on in your mind as well, such as thoughts about how you'll perform and images of the upcoming performance--all which can be negative and doubting or positive and optimistic. Internally, you need to learn to manage these thoughts, images, and feelings to ensure you are not creating unnecessary pressure for yourself. Learning how to control these thoughts and images will greatly improve your chances of performing to the best of your ability--and handle the pressure--when it counts.

Dealing With the Pressure of Competition

That being said, we will take a two-pronged approach to learning to deal with the pressure of competition:

1. *Accept that some external pressure will be part of the competition experience.* As a result of this, **you need to train for these pressure situations.** There are many inventive, creative things you and your coach can do in practice to help prepare you for the pressure of competition.

Two ways to do this include:

Create pressure situations in practice. Have simulated competitions in practice or create other ways of attaching meaning and significance to your performance in practice. Bring in officials, pipe in the noise of a crowd, have a reward for meeting a certain level of performance, or penalize yourself if you fail to meet a specific standard. Creating this pressure in practice will get you used to dealing with pressure so you become 'inoculated' against it. It is the same line of reasoning as getting a Booster shot to 'inoculate' you against certain illnesses. You will become used to the pressure and it will no longer have an ill effect on your performance.

Use imagery to see and feel yourself performing. What is of crucial importance is that you are realistic in terms of this imagery--see the environment as it will really be with all the distractions discussed earlier and feel in your imagery as you will truly feel in the competition. For example, visualize standing on the blocks waiting for the gun and feel the adrenaline running through your body; visualize the last 50m of your race and feel the discomfort and fatigue in your legs. You will prepare yourself for performing under pressure by seeing and feeling yourself perform well under the conditions, both internal and external, that will exist when you are actually competing. See Chapter 2 on imagery techniques for additional tips on making this exercise more realistic and helpful.

2. *Develop specific strategies to deal with 'on-site' challenges that help you manage your reaction to the pressure.* In our work with athletes at the Olympic Training Center, we have observed many obstacles that get in the way of athletes performing at their best. What follows on the next pages are some frequently observed challenges as well as practical strategies to deal with each challenge.

Obstacles

Strategies to Overcome Obstacles

<p>Shaky self-confidence; doubts about ability</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Image successful past performances. • Visualize future performances seeing and feeling yourself perform as you are capable. • Create a 'Success Log' where you identify something positive from every practice session. Refer to this before each competition (see Chapter 9). • Remind yourself of the 'basics' you rely on that are crucial to your success. • Tailor your training sessions to ensure success in the week leading to an important competition. • Monitor your self-talk. Battle the negative, doubting thoughts with positive, productive self-talk (see Chapter 3 on Self-Talk).
<p>Feeling pressure to perform at an exceptionally high level.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus efforts on what you need to do to perform your best rather than waste energy on worry. • Do what has worked for you in the past, stick with your pre-competition routine (see Chapter 8 regarding pre-competition routines). • Remind yourself of your goals for the competition (which should be under your control – Chapter 1 on effective goal setting). • Surround yourself with supportive, positive people. • Behave and think confidently (see Chapter 6). • Keep the competition in perspective, this is only one aspect of your athletic career.
<p>Letting distractions (media, family, rankings, crowd, etc.) influence your preparation.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set guidelines with family, friends, media; communicate when you need time for yourself and when you will have time for them. • Recognize that some events are uncontrollable but what you do have control over is your reaction to the event. • Anticipate any and all possible distraction and develop a strategy to deal with each of them, so you are not caught off guard. • Keep yourself physically isolated from situations that take you out of your preparation routine.

Obstacles

Strategies to Overcome Obstacles

<p>Feeling like you have to improve or change what you have done in the past.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Remember that the importance of the event should not effect the approach that has worked in the past.• Remind yourself that you trust your training and your competition strategy.• Adhere to you consistent mental preparation routine.• Just as you wouldn't change physical skills at the last minute, don't attempt to change mental skills that have been successful for you.
<p>Increased worry and physical anxiety.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Manage your physical anxiety (increase heart rate, tense muscles) through deep breathing exercises or some other form of physical relaxation.• Remind yourself of successful practices and performances to calm your mind.• Focus on whatyou need to do in the upcoming performance to keep your mind active with productive thoughts.• If you have time before competing, distract yourself by listening to a Walkman© or talking with friends.• Review Chapter 8 on Energy Management for other helpful tips.



Pressure Management Process

You can begin to manage how you let pressure affect your performance. . . it is your responsibility. Three steps to doing so are identified below to get you started today:

- 1. Awareness.** Start to become aware of how various pressures and distractions affect your performance. It can be helpful to keep a written log of your competition experiences, so you can immediately note what pressure you felt and how you dealt with it after each competition.
- 2. Preparation.** Prepare a strategy/strategies to deal with the pressures. Several strategies were suggested in this chapter. . . you need to figure the strategies that will work best for you.
- 3. Practice.** Practice implementing these strategies in practice and integrate them in your pre-competition routine.