

Practice Performers

by HeadStrong Consulting

Why is it that some athletes perform exceptionally well in practice, but cannot maintain that same level in competition? Are you, or is someone you know, a “practice performer”?

Why It Happens

There are three predominant reasons some athletes perform better in practice than competition:

1. **Perception** --- In the athlete’s mind, competition has become a “huge” event. There is a lot more pressure put on competition from the athlete, coaches, parents, peers, etc. The athlete then begins to attribute great importance to the outcome of the event, almost as a life or death situation. This importance becomes a threat and the athlete begins to question himself.
2. **Anxiety** --- Anxiety is the result of the athlete perceiving a situation as threatening. Physically, the athlete may experience “butterflies” in her stomach, increased heart rate, and sweaty palms, among other symptoms. Psychologically, the athlete begins to question herself and her abilities. She begins to use negative self-talk (“I stink”), and focus on all the reasons why her upcoming performance is going to be a failure.
3. **Expectation** --- Once the perception of the event is negative, and the athlete experiences high levels of anxiety, he begins to expect failure. We’ve all heard the quote, “the body achieves what the mind believes”. This is a true statement and will be discussed in more detail in future blogs. Thinking of this, if an athlete expects to fail, he most likely will. As a result of this expectation, motivation and effort diminish – and the outcome meets the expectation. Also, if an athlete has experienced failure in a previous competition or the last time he competed against this particular opponent, he may likely expect to fail again. Thus, the outcome is determined before the contest begins.

What Can Be Done

The good news is that this situation CAN be changed!! We would go so far as to say that 99 percent (if not more!) of this issue is psychological in nature. Think about it. At the basic level, if an athlete has an exceptional performance in practice/training, she has the physical ability to do the same in competition.

1. **Perception** --- One of the best ways to change your perception about the competition is to come to the realization that the sport is the same, and the physical requirements are the same, whether performed in practice or competition. The only thing different is how you are thinking about the situation. Changing your mindset to a more appropriate one (competitive mindset, challenge mindset, or even championship mindset – all will be discussed in future blogs) will be extremely beneficial. In addition, if you can perform well in practice, a reminder of this will help feed into your confidence. You know this sport. You know how to play it. View the event in a realistic perspective and understand that your life does NOT depend on the outcome.
2. **Anxiety** --- This is one of the most common phenomenon athletes experience that destroys performance. However, it can be controlled through the use of relaxation techniques, breathing methods, and refocusing (you may purchase relaxation recordings [here](#)). Also, if you focus on the performance (1-2 specific parts of the performance), you are not focusing on the fact that you are anxious, which will positively influence performance.
3. **Expectation** --- Rather than expecting to fail, change your expectation to something more productive. For example, what part of your performance can you improve? What are your strengths? In this case, it is important to focus on performance factors that are within your control.

Tips for Coaches

1. Increase confidence by pointing out the athlete’s strengths.
2. Reduce pressure by not making a big deal out of competition.
3. Make practice as much like competition as possible and vice versa.

Tips for Parents

1. Reward successes in both practices and competitions (not competition only).
2. Only go to competitions if your son/daughter wants you there.
3. Encourage enjoyment over winning.