

Emotions As Teammates Rather Than Opponents

by Dr. Colleen Hacker

Controlling the jitters and other negative emotions in sport is no easy task and often becomes a career-long process. So many variables can impact performance in both constructive and destructive ways that learning to bring the psychological factors under personal and consistent control can be one of the most important techniques an athlete can master. As you become more adept at regularly engaging in psychological skills training as part of your traditional practice and game routines (rather than relegating it to a separate, often neglected skill) you will notice two common effects: 1) that implementation becomes automatic and, 2) that you will benefit from the synergistic effect of multiple techniques.

This article will focus on the effects of tenseness, worry and anxiety and suggest simple methods of thinking, acting and responding to these events in ways likely to facilitate optimal performance. I'll begin by outlining one key premise regarding choices available to athletes faced with difficulties, adversity or setbacks. Before we specifically address this topic, it is important to note a critical distinction often confused by many in the sport world. When sport psychologists discuss the notion of "learning to control emotions, thoughts and physiological processes", the idea is not to create mini-robots, devoid of emotion, affect or feeling. Nor is the goal to deny feelings or to bury them under the surface. Rather, the goal is to make wise choices regarding emotional factors under personal control. Recognize that our response to situations is far more important in determining our reaction, the likely outcome and ultimately our athletic success than the actual issues themselves.

Athletes can, and will, be frustrated, disappointed or even angry at times. Those emotions are normal, expected and human. The problem arises only when those feelings result in negative behaviors, attitudes, choices and expectations. Let's use an example of a soccer player feeling frustrated because they weren't selected to start in a particular game. The athlete may perceive that the coach doesn't have confidence in them or that the coach believes that an athlete lacks certain skills or expertise. Based on that interpretation, an athlete may respond by staying after practice every day to put in extra time on the field, participating in added scrimmage opportunities and pick-up games, or by seeking out an expert coach to assist in their technical and tactical refinement. Because of that players' choice to respond in a task-oriented, positive manner, they will have then turned their frustration and disappointment into a competitive advantage. If, on the other hand, the player responds to that perceived "injustice" by the coach by quitting the team, bad-mouthing the coach or losing confidence in themselves, then they have made choices that undermine the likelihood of future athletic success. Again, the choice is yours to make. Both options are available. Be sure you're making the right choice!

How then, can you learn to control the jitters, quiet the doubts and fears and turn your setbacks into opportunities? First, realize that you already possess the ability to appropriately relax and compete at a high level. Learn to trust your skills. Commit to the highest work rate possible and establish an appropriate expectation to compete in your ideal zone of optimal performance. Through the simple act of controlled breathing, the use of performance-enhancing imagery and self-talk and a commitment to high quality practice (to name a few choices under an athlete's control), players can clear many of the obstacles keeping them from a best performance experience. Somehow, players allow doubts, anxiety and worry to take up permanent residence in their thinking.

The easiest place to start to exert effective control of activation levels and performance-enhancing emotions is by focusing on appropriate breathing patterns and effective thought management. You can take a deep, slow, cleansing belly breath. As you inhale, focus on a reason why you are prepared, skilled, capable and ready to perform. Repeat a short phrase that captures those factors on both the inhalation and again on (or throughout) the exhalation. If you want to calm your body, as well as your fears, then the long, slow exhalation phase of your breathing cycle should be twice as long as the inhalation phase. For example, if you inhale on a two-count (one-two) then you should exhale on a four-count (one-two-three-four). Better yet, combine that exhalation with an audible sigh or by putting your tongue in an "n" position on the roof of your mouth to help facilitate the relaxation of your jaw and neck muscles. Allow your shoulders to rise up toward your ears as you inhale and, as your belly expands outward with air, you should repeat the first part of your affirmation phrase. If you want to focus on activating and

energizing yourself, then your breathing emphasis and focus should be on the inhalation phase (rather than the relaxing exhalation-focus). Again, combine your breath control with a performance phrase. An example might be, "I am ready, fit and strong" (as you inhale) and "I can make this play" (as you exhale).

Some people find it helpful to use technique-reminders as part of their breathing cycle. A soccer player preparing to take a free kick might inhale saying "relaxed and clam" and exhale saying "smooth to the upper V" (technique reminders to strike the ball smoothly, cleanly and to a specific part of the goal). Additional examples of affirmation phrases to use with your breathing techniques include: "I am powerful and fast" "I've done this a thousand times before" "I am prepared and confident" "This is my game" "I love to play"

The key is to consistently implement the selected performance phrases and combine them with the well-practiced breathing techniques. Do this at practice in order to habituate the technique, so that in competition, when the beneficial effects are most needed, these techniques are unconsciously implemented.

These breathing and self-talk suggestions, like most of the psychological skills training techniques, involve four phases of development: 1) self-awareness and analysis, 2) individual experimentation, 3) consistent application, and finally, 4) revision and refinement. These techniques will hopefully become completely automatic so that your mind is free from worry and fear. **The key is to feel confident, relaxed, prepared and free to play your game as only you know how. Athletes perform best when they simply "relax and let it happen". Let your body do what you have trained it to do for countless hours, months and years.** You already know how to play in order to perform at your best. All that you're trying to do now, is to clear away any obstacles in your mind and body and to allow your best performance to be displayed.

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