

THE WHOLE ATHLETE EXPERIENCE

FC UNITED SPORTS PERFORMANCE

GAMEDAY NERVES: CAUSES, EFFECTS, AND FIXES

Have you ever experienced racing heart beats, difficulty breathing, tight muscles, a queasy stomach, jumpiness, jitters, stiffness, or an inability to move fluidly? Do you ever feel thoughts of failure, uncertainty, or other negative think patterns that cloud your focus before/during practices or games?

You know you can play better, but you can't answer why you did not.

In this month's edition, we will analyze the causes and effects of these psychosomatic symptoms, and discuss ways to manage them.

CAUSES:

The symptoms mentioned above are signs that many researchers now associate with **Performance Anxiety**. Defined as a state of extreme nervousness experienced before or during participation in an activity. Performance Anxiety is a multidimensional concept that impacts athletes in two primary ways: *trait and state anxiety*. **Trait anxiety** is a personality characteristic that remains relatively stable over time, while **state anxiety** is activated in response to certain situations, such as an athletic competition.

Some people are naturally anxious, while for many others, a certain stimulus triggers that same anxiety.

Regardless of where the anxiety starts, it is okay to be nervous. Where mental strength comes into play, is how an athlete funnels that nervousness.

Listed below are some predispositions researchers found consistent in athletes with Performance Anxiety.

COMMON CAUSES:

In general, researchers found that the following are typical causes of performance anxiety:

1. Perfectionism
2. Personality traits
3. Past-failures
4. Individual Sports versus Team Sports
5. Unfamiliarity with a situation



EFFECTS:

As discussed in last month's newsletter, "*Excellence is an Attitude, Not an Endgame*," we learned that mental skills training differentiates an athlete's success from his or her peers.

Successful athletes must learn to approach competitions with a mental framework that allows them to thrive despite potentially adverse environmental or psychological variables.

The same thought process must be applied here. In the same way that mental fortitude elevates an athlete's level of play, performance anxiety can decrease quality of play.

Learning how to manage Performance Anxiety is one area where athletes first begin to develop their mental strength, as it impacts athletes at all stages of development, regardless of talent level.

When mastered, it can be the most complex, but assuring asset aiding successful performances.

Let's be clear though, mental strength is a skill, just as any other. It must be revealed as a need, taught, and then developed.

COMMON EFFECTS:

Athletes who experience anxiety pre-competition can risk:

1. Higher Risk of Injury
2. Sport-related Trauma
3. Quitting or leaving the sport
4. Negative Self-Thought patterns
5. Self-Harm
6. Social Isolation

The New Science of Embracing Performance Anxiety

In collaboration with Brad Stulberg, @BStulberg based on an article appearing in Outside Magazine

Designed by @YLMSportScience

DEVELOP A ROUTINE

1

- 1 - Having a pre-planned series of actions gives you something to focus on so your mind can't wander and become anxious
- 2 - Consistently practicing pre-performance routines reduced anxiety and increased performance
- 3 - The elements of the routine itself don't really matter, what does matter is that you design a series of steps that makes you feel good, and that you practice it enough so that you become comfortable with it



REFRAME ANXIETY AS AN EXCITEMENT

2

- 1 - When try to suppress those pre-race nerves, you are inherently telling yourself that something is wrong
- 2 - Instead of trying to calm yourself down, reappraise pre-performance anxiety as excitement
- 3 - The sensations you feel prior to a big event are neutral—if you view them in a positive light, they are more likely to have a positive impact on your performance



CHANGE YOUR BODY TO CHANGE YOUR MIND

3

- 1 - Body language has a huge impact on how you feel about yourself. Prior to big events, open yourself up and make yourself big
- 2 - If you hold your body like you're confident and in charge, your mind is likely to follow

Perhaps the best part of these tactics is that they are not mutually exclusive. They are most effective when used together, and they work across almost all pursuits—whether that's prepping for an Olympic race or getting ready for your first 5K

REFERENCES: Hazell et al. EJSS 2014; Cheadle, On Top of Your Game: Mental Skills to Maximize Athletic Performance, 2013; Brooks, J Exp Psychol 2014



FIXES:

RESEARCH STUDY

In nearly all tested cases, researchers from multiple, cross sectional studies found that Performance Anxiety and its psychosomatic symptoms begin with a chain reaction of negative thoughts.

- "I play so well in practice but mess up in games."
- "I'm so nervous in games that I get sick to my stomach."
- "I become so anxious in competitions that I can't concentrate."
- "I don't feel my best today, I am not ready."
- "I don't want to do this."
- "I get so nervous that I don't even enjoy my sport anymore."

Based upon common findings in their studies, researchers tested three main methods to teach athletes how to manage their competition stress.

1. Develop a routine -- it does not matter so much what the pieces of the routine are, but athletes that have a consistent, practiced pre-competition plan to concentrate their thoughts and focus their efforts reported less pre-competition anxiety and reported feeling more physically prepared during the game!

2. Reframe anxiety as excitement -- Two negatives do not equal a positive. You cannot cancel out negative self-talk with negative feelings about your nerves. Instead, focus on the normalcy of nervousness and funnel it into excitement for the game. If you feel positively about your feelings, chances are better for a positive outcome.

3. Change your body to change your mind -- BODY LANGUAGE is proven to impact your mental state. Every few minutes leading up to your competition, check in. Are your shoulders tight and rolled forward? Is your head drooped forward, concealing your face?

Try sitting up tall, pull your shoulders back, head held high, and take deep breaths. If you feel stronger, your mind reads that cue.

Conclusion: Your mind can be your greatest asset or your worst undoing. The athlete that excels must learn to construct a fortress within themselves, reinforced by self-efficacy, resilience, and fortitude.

Be present in your practice and games. Learn how you react to different forms of adversity. And most importantly, control the variables that you can control: yourself and your game.

NEW TERMS!

Psychosomatic: The interaction of the mind with the body; the mind's influence on physical reactions.

Self-efficacy: An individual's belief in his or her capacity to execute behaviors necessary to produce specific performance attainments.

LOOKING AHEAD:

Remember to be a mental giant! When talent meets talent, the mentally tough will win.

As always, if you have questions over the information provided, feel free to email me at Taylor.h@fcunitedpremier.com!

**References and research for this newsletter are cited to YLM Sport Science:

<https://journals.humankinetics.com/doi/pdf/10.1123/ijsspp.2018-0093>