

Strategies to Manage Performance Pressure

In the most recent issue of the *NSCA's Performance Training Journal*, we took an initial look at competitive pressure. As you may recall in this Mind Games column, we overviewed some of the differences in the external environment and your own internal environment in practice as compared to competition. No wonder performance sometimes differs in these two settings—the environment one competes in is often very different from what one experiences in practice. The challenge is to prepare for these differences so performance is not compromised.

You were also asked the question, “what plagues you?” That is, when your competitive performance has not been up to your capabilities, what seems to get in your way—low confidence, anxiety, an inability to manage distractions? In this article, we will address the final piece of this puzzle. That is, what are strategies to help manage competitive pressure? The following are some suggestions.

In Practice

Because external pressure is often part of the competition experience, you need to prepare for these pressure situations. Just as you prepare yourself to deal with strengths or tendencies of the opponents you face, you need to prepare yourself for the unique pressures or challenges

you face—be they physical or mental. Purposefully use practice to prepare you for the challenges of competition. There is a multitude of ways to prepare for pressure situations, dependent on “what plagues you most.” The key is to integrate the competitive challenge into practice to provide the opportunity to learn how to manage the challenge. As examples,

- Play the noise of a crowd loudly at practice to challenge yourself to manage this distraction.
- Create rewards for yourself for performing up to a certain level. Conversely, penalize yourself for failure to achieve a practice goal. These incentives can help attach significance and pressure to your performance.
- Practice critical elements of performance under conditions of physical and mental fatigue—the same fatigue you will experience in competition.
- Try to simulate the physical manifestations of anxiety (increased heart rate, rapid breathing, and jitteriness) then challenge yourself to perform under such conditions. These symptoms can be induced through physical exertion or imagery.
- Use imagery to create “competitive situations” in practice. 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.



In Competition

Creating pressure situations or competitive conditions in practice is a step towards helping you deal with various types of performance pressure. It is equally important to have strategies in place to help during competition when faced with various challenges or obstacles. Let's look at some often encountered obstacles and identify strategies to implement to help you overcome the obstacle.

To overcome pre-competition worry:

- Remind yourself of successful practices and past performances.
- Focus on what you need to do in the competition to keep your mind filled with productive (not detrimental) thinking.
- Manage your self-talk to help you control your mental anxiety (refer to past PTJ articles on ‘energy management’).
- Distract yourself from your worries by talking with teammates, reading a book, listening to music, etc.
- Using imagery, review your competition plan—seeing and experiencing success.

To overcome pre-competition physical anxiety:

- Your increased heart rate, tense muscles, and rapid, shallow breathing can be managed through controlled breathing exercises or other physical relaxation strategies.
- If your muscles are tight, stretch them. Keep them optimally loose and limber by moving slowly and stretching.
- Ask for a light massage to work out tightness.

To overcome low self-confidence:

- Visualize the upcoming performance, seeing and experiencing your success.
- Focus on what is controllable. Confidence can be undermined when trying to control or worry about things that are uncontrollable (e.g. weather, competitors, start position, officials).
- The majority of athletes experience some doubts or concerns. The key is to avoid focusing on the doubts and instead get on with the business of what you need to do to perform well.
- Direct your physical and mental energy to your performance rather than using your energy on your opponent's performance.
- Remind yourself of the key elements of your performance, the things you need to do, and can do, to perform well.
- Set realistic, yet challenging goals for yourself.

To overcome the pressure to have a "peak" performance at a major competition:

- Implement the pre-competition routine you have developed that facilitates your performance regardless of whether it is a pre-season or end of season competition.
- Keep the competition in perspective. Acknowledge that you want to perform well, but it is just one of a multitude of competitive opportunities.
- Regardless of the environment, all you have control over is your performance. Focus on what you need to do to perform well.
- Implement strategies to build your confidence.

Using the above strategies will help you overcome the pressures of competition and reach new levels of performance. Remember practice makes perfect, so be sure to practice these skills before you need them in the heat of competition. ▲

About the Author

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