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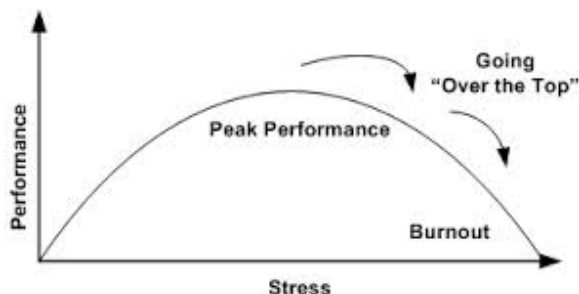
Continued from September 6<sup>th</sup>, 2014

## “The Effects Of Anxiety On Performance”

*In the first part of this article we discussed the relationship of mental/physical preparation and how arousal levels can make or break and athlete's performance during competition. I will continue with this idea today.*

Over thinking due to anxiety increases the physiological response, and leads athletes to become ultra self-conscious resulting in a loss of self confidence and a breakdown in physical performance. This slowing of the body's reaction time is often due to an athletes attempt to consciously control the body rather than the athlete simply reacting to the situation as they have been trained which can result in confusion and performance below expectation.

As was previously discussed in last week's first edition The Inverted U theory or as Gary Mack (2001), sport psychology consultant and author of the book "Mind Gym", calls it a performance curve is a dynamic concept in understanding the effects of anxiety on performance. By numbering both the vertical (performance) line and the horizontal stress line to ten they can then recognize when performance is at the top of the human performance curve.



If an athletes' ideal number is seven in order to be fully alert and functioning at peak levels it is important they know this and are able to compare it to how they feel at this moment.

Understanding your numbers is a key concept for performance growth. Mack believes that an athlete has to know their ideal number for peak performance (the top of the performance curve) and the numbers which represent their danger zones; those feelings which are low, no energy, or high, to amped up, and can act as early warning signs. He compares it to a highly sophisticated sports car; if you are red lining (too amped up) before the first whistle blows you know you are on the verge of overheating and breaking down physically and mentally. The athlete's personal RPM level can make or break them before, during, or after competition. If the number is too high they overheat, if it is to low they are sluggish and slow, and find it difficult to get going. In each case the athlete is not performing as they would like.

Reducing cognitive anxiety is the goal, anxiety affects performance more when the athlete gets to high on the stress side, but when millions of thoughts are flying through your brain, how do you create calm in the midst of a storm? It is the goal of all coaches to limit the effects of anxiety on performance by teaching some form of minimizing strategy. "One play at a time", "stay centered" are just a couple coach speak phrases I've heard before. But athletes who are not trained in recognizing their symptoms will not know what to do with this information. Focusing on the task at hand can help to reduce anxiety levels, bringing the athlete back to a stable comfortable place where the **goal** is to simply see the ball, and react to it. Coaches and athletes alike have to recognize when the athlete is too low or too high and adjust to their ideal number.

So the question remains; how do we stop the drop in performance and regain our composure in the midst of competition? By returning your focus to the skills needed to succeed rather than the outcome is a great way to raise your game to higher levels of play. Often your need for something can be the very thing that keeps you from achieving. When you let go of your need for success, for winning, for breaking records, etc. success is likely to come calling again as your mind and body begin to function as one.

Mack describes a peanut's cartoon where Lucy is holding the ball for Charlie Brown to kick. When he misses again, Lucy explains that he has got to start using his mind and body in order to succeed. Charlie answers, "My mind and body haven't spoken in years". To reach peak levels of success the mind and body must work together.

When the musculature and physiological systems of the body begin to tighten from the affects of anxiety they slow down reflecting in poor performance. Trying harder doesn't solve it, this further deteriorates performance. To much information is being processed by their mind during competition, therefore confusing the body as to what the task really is.

"Extra effort does not work" according to Eysenck, & Calvo (1992). The sudden breakdown in skilled performance and the inability to perform a well-learned and practiced skill can turn a good performance to a dismal performance. And amazingly it can strike suddenly and without warning. One minute you are fine, the next you are spiraling out of control. A bad call by an official, a breakdown in communication during a particularly important play, or just getting beat on a play all can trigger this response in an athlete and they must be able to compartmentalize that moment so that other plays or players are not affected as well.

An athlete's optimal number is a crucial piece of knowledge which each must have but is different for each individual. It is dependent on their temperament, the length of the event, and the nature of the task. A professional football player will have a significantly higher number for peak performance than a professional golfer. Some athlete's are high strung and need to be careful not to overheat while others are low key and may need to amp themselves up in order to put their body in position for success. Regardless, the faster the mind moves the greater the odds

that your athlete will lose focus and perform outside of their optimal level for peak performance.

#### References:

Eysenck, M. W., & Calvo, M. (1992), Anxiety and performance: The processing efficiency theory, *Cognition and Emotion*, 6, 409-434.

Mack, G. (2001), *Mind Gym*, McGraw-Hill Books.