

# PEAK ATHLETIC CONSULTING, LLC.

## **Awareness, Self Talk, and Conscious Control:**

(A Series on Behavioral Control Before, During,  
and After Competition)

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*The following is one in a series of articles dealing with the mental and physical effects of stress which can affect performance of athletes of all ability levels. How the mind and body work to accomplish both simple and complex tasks says a great deal about how an athlete performs during competition.*

### **Article I:** Don't Let Your Eyes Fool You.

While visiting with a friend last night we got on the subject of intimidation in sports. Not in the bad boy sense, but rather the idea of high quality athletes being intimidated for seemingly no reason and underperforming as a result. He mentioned how his 12 year old son seemed to fall apart on the mound when a bigger, stronger looking 12 year old came to the plate. (As a side note, his son is a very capable pitcher) In this case, visual images of size translated into over enhanced ability causing stress in his son and a decline in performance. In other words, from a mental stand point, "his eyes were bigger than his stomach".

The visual image of size stimulated his brain in such a way that fear was induced. This feeling of fear then caused his thoughts to become outwardly based and he became protective in his approach, decreasing his fluid throwing motion. (Fear in this case of the unknown.) He did not know this large competitor by name or reputation yet was fearful based on the optical picture which his eyes had produced. In his mind size equaled enhanced ability.

He further stated that a year earlier his son had been on the same team with one of these extra large pre-teens and witnessed how this large child had normal or even below normal abilities. This, a year later, gave him extreme confidence when he faced this previous teammate who was now on an opposing team. No fear! He had total confidence in his own abilities and an attack approach to pitching which resulted in very positive results. In this instance the threat of size was neutralized by his knowledge of his

opponent. Awareness of himself and his surroundings created peace and confidence.

I have to admit to my own failure to deal with this same idea when I was a DI college pitcher. On the verge of breaking a long standing career record for most wins at the University of Nebraska I was facing USC and Mark McGuire. I had heard all the stories, and believe me in person Mark was a large human who instantly produced a sick to my stomach feeling. I changed my approach and game plan based on visual information which resulted in two home runs for McGuire in only two at bats. By becoming aware of my mental state I was able to return to my game plan resulting in two strike outs for McGuire to finish the game. We won.

I recall other instances where a large, highly talented athlete was an opponent of my son's basketball team. Because they had grown up together knowledge of his game became a shot of confidence for our team. The larger, more powerful athlete was rendered literally helpless and became a non factor in the game. In another instance a very large and physical player of unknown physical ability caused stress, literally a fear of the unknown, which resulted in negative feelings and performance levels.

So.....is there a way to avoid this optical pitfall? The answer is yes and it starts with an athlete's ability to become aware of and notice the subtle changes in their physical body which occur during these instances of stress. Being fooled by our own conscious thoughts is nothing new. The conscious mind wants to be in control and instantly makes choices of fight or flight based on peripheral information gathered in an instant. This conscious thought can override an athlete's preparation resulting in "second guessing" their approach to competition. Trusting your physical abilities and preparation can slow the game down producing powerful performances.

Once an athlete allows his/her thoughts to focus on outside distractions (ex. size, reputation, the length of a race, win/loss records, speed, etc.) the body and mind become separated and no longer work together smoothly. Awareness of where your focus is and how you feel can be a great benefit for athletes preparing for, and involved in, competitive situations. Just like I lost my way against Mark McGuire, and then found myself again, an athlete can learn the warning signs which cause them to lose focus and get back in the game.