



The Effects Of Anxiety On Performance.

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The 2014 College World Series final was set: Virginia vs. Vanderbilt in a three game series for all the marbles. Virginia ace, Kyle Kirby had looked forward to this moment for years and was now in the spot light. He cruised through the first inning in 10 pitches, and followed up that start in the second inning with another quick inning in frame two. Inning three started the same, but with one out things changed. Before Virginia could respond Vanderbilt had put up nine runs on three hits, five walks, and a hit by pitch leaving everyone wondering how Kirby could completely lose his control so quickly. What happened?

We can ask the same question about hundreds of elite athletes, in all sports, who have succumbed in the midst of competitive pressure and lost their feel. Missing free throws with the game on the line; dropping an easy touchdown pass, throwing multiple interceptions, having trouble returning serves in volleyball and tennis, missing a two foot putt to get into the state tournament, or running your worst race of the year when it counts the most. Every sport has its own built-in set of anxiety producing pressures, the majority of which are self imposed by the athlete's themselves.

You've watched it happen at the youth, high school, college, and professional levels. Age and maturity may help an athlete prevent the dreaded mental meltdown, but even the most elite athletes who perform on the national and world stage fall victim before our eyes leaving us to again ask; What just happened?

Competitive athletes, whether they realize it or not are all seeking that elusive place called the "Zone", where all is well, and their performance

during competition is perfect. We love to watch those brilliant performances under extreme duress where the athlete can do no wrong, where the stars just seem to line up, and Sports Center replays the experience over and over. We also cringe when we watch an athlete melt under pressure, losing all sense of physical and mental control and becoming a highlight on ESPN's, "Not Top Ten".

The search for "Peak Performance" has always been here, but until more recently the amateur athletic community has been more willing to associate them with elevated physical ability. That experience only happens to the best athletes with the most skill. Elite and professional athletes on the other hand have said for years that physical skill at their level is equal between competitors, but the mental game becomes 70% of the battle. The athlete who is more mentally prepared often is rewarded with the victory. If you think about it, does it matter if you are an elite athlete? Can athletes at lower levels of physical ability still achieve peak performance? The answer is yes, and we see it happen every year in every sport.

Anxiety producing situations occur in all areas of our lives and our mental approach to the issue often determines our success. As an educator I see it daily as students fall victim to test anxiety and label themselves as failures. In the work place we see salesman quit and give up. How humans react to these fear induced, anxiety producing situations is often the difference between failure and success and can often be traced back to our mental approach and how we handle distracting thoughts.

Athlete's prepare their bodies for competition but often neglect to prepare their minds with the same expectations. We see them lift weights to gain strength, run for endurance, do agility work for quickness, and expect this to be enough. While this preparation is a must in order to compete at a high level it does not ensure success. How many times have we seen teams with less ability win over other highly rated teams? All you have to do is watch the NCAA basketball tournament every year and you will

see an underdog win. It happens year in and year out. So why is it that with so much history behind this that the better teams still fall? They get distracted.

Distraction comes in many forms and can have devastating effects on performance which affects self confidence. You can be too amped up, or you can be so uninterested your body performs sluggishly at best. The best of the best athletes tighten up and freeze just like amateur weekend warriors when the level of expectation exceeds their level of mental preparation. The fact is that peak performance is achieved when athletes experience a moderate level of pressure. This moderate level is different for each athlete under varying circumstances and is determined by their level of physical skill, their personality, their anxiety level, and the complexity of the task at hand.

If an athlete does not train and prepare their body they will fall victim to their own thoughts as they know deep down they are not ready to take on a bigger, stronger opponent and doubt will occupy their minds rather than focusing on the task in front of them. We cannot place all our emphasis on physical ability because we have seen physical ability fail and fall to those with less perceived skill.

Personality issues must also be acknowledged when it comes to attaining athletic success and so coaches work tirelessly to put their athletes in the right position for success. The kid with a great motor may be a great running back, or linebacker but struggle on the basketball floor where initiating contact is not as well accepted.

Both "state" and "trait" anxiety affect athletes as well and often can determine an athlete's response to stressful situations. State anxiety refers to an athlete's mental assessment of a threat. How much concern do they have for their opponent rather than focusing on the skills they have been taught can be a big distraction? Trait anxiety refers to their response to that threat and is a strong indicator of their personality. An athlete's self talk plays heavily on their

psychological approach and can make or break their performance during competition.

Finally task complexity can have a positive or negative effect on performance. This refers to the level of attention and effort which must be put into a task by the athlete. The ability to throw the ball into the strike zone with the bases loaded and the winning run at third base might be seen as very complex when compared to making a free throw when your team is up by 25 points. This can be seen in all sports, a field goal to win is more complex mentally than a field goal in the first quarter of a game. Task complexity varies with the circumstances of the competition and all athletes respond differently.

Regardless of what type of activity you participate in, when it becomes competitive, athletes will feel the effects of anxiety. In most casual, playful activities this never becomes an issue as the expectation level is simply to have fun. As coaches, have you caught yourself telling your players to just have fun? On the other hand when the competition heats up and your performance is being evaluated, anxiety levels can and will have an effect, positively or negatively, on their performance.

The debilitating effects of high anxiety can range from that feeling of "butterflies" in your stomach to full blown panic attacks (Graydon, 2002). As coaches you have seen both, and understand that a certain amount of arousal is necessary to prepare your body to work efficiently, but too much arousal and your body breaks down as your mind tries to control every movement. This conscious control response of the mind can make an elite athlete perform like an amateur regardless of their physical training and preparation.

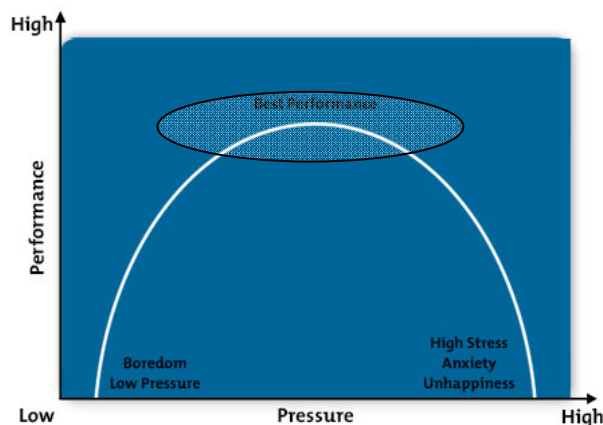
When the mind perceives a threat it responds by attempting to control the body, and when you over think your body cannot react. While the idea of muscle memory is a misnomer, muscles do not have memory, the concept applies here; athletes train their body and their mind records it all. The more we train, the more precise our body is able to move and we create a path from

the mind to the body. Much like a GPS will plot out the quickest path from point A to point B. But if we encounter a detour, something our body was not ready for, our mind must make adjustments. The more complex the adjustment, the longer it takes for our body to react on the field.

You've heard it said, he/she is just a step slow. Well this could be a physical issue where the athletic ability of one player is just not up to the competition, or it could be a mental issue where the athlete fears getting beat and therefore begins to guess, or create a detour. This often happens when the athlete is not prepared mentally and subconsciously begins second guessing the coaches game plan and their self perceived ability.

Sports psychologists and coaches alike are gaining a great deal of understanding and new knowledge about the effects of stress and anxiety on performance but it is evident that controlling the level of emotional involvement during high expectation events is much easier to say than to do.

A long standing approach to understanding the relationship between arousal and performance dates back to 1908 when the theory of the "Inverted U" was developed by Yerkes and Dodson. This theory postulates that as your arousal level increases, your body's response also increases to produce higher levels of



performance.

This can result in the athlete achieving a peak performance type result, but..... this only works to a certain point before too much arousal begins to make performance decline as the athlete cannot manage all the outside distraction and the mind becomes overly occupied, creating the previously mentioned detour in the mind/body road map, causing the body to react more slowly.

Too little arousal and your athlete appears bored and sluggish, too much arousal and your athlete becomes highly agitated and unable to focus. A coach must understand that each athlete is different and requires individualized instruction so that they can determine what their own distinct level of arousal is which will give them their best chance to perform at their peak.

Your quarterback may need less arousal to attain peak performance than your defensive end who has one responsibility, sack the quarterback. One athletes mind has to see the entire field, and know the situation; the other must simply focus on the guy with the ball and go full speed towards him. Knowing each player and their distinct level of arousal necessary to perform can be the difference between success and failure. Knowing how the mind affects the body can also help a coach get rid of a detour during competition.

To be continued.....

References:

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