Blessed or stressed? Dealing with pressure in sport

Published 09/09/15 by Blake Richardson

- Coaches must aim to deliver the best result in the worst possible conditions.
- Preparation is paramount in helping to reduce pressure.
- Try to replicate the feeling of tension in your sessions.
- Repetition, repetition, repetition!

How well you cope with pressure can mean the difference between finishing first and missing out on a medal. It isn’t hyperbole to claim that if you possess this innate ability to thrive under pressure, it can be a monumental weapon; if you don’t, it can be a monumental chink in your armour.

In team sport, the habit of crumbling under pressure has been perfected by the England football team. Two words that strike fear into fans and England players alike: penalty shoot-out. And two more words to sum up the aftermath of said shoot-out: inevitable heartbreak.

So what methods and techniques can coaches adopt to instil mental fortitude in their protégés so they can avoid such major meltdowns and the agony that trails in their wicked wake?

Nature versus nurture

Nick Ruddock is British Gymnastics’ High Performance Coach.

He agrees that people can fall into two camps: the haves and the have-nots.

‘It is quite clear that some athletes are genetically wired to cope better with pressure than others,’ says Ruddock.

‘The bottom line is that, with really strong competitors, they haven’t just been taught to cope with pressure, there is something innate there as well.’

But can athletes who aren’t mentally tough still hit the same towering heights as those blessed with the right genes?

‘Our job as coaches is to push them through it,’ adds Ruddock. ‘Whether or not they can consistently replicate the results of some of those who do cope with pressure is another thing.

‘A lot of it is circumstantial, but an athlete who does cope well with pressure can consistently perform at that level under those sorts of demands. Those who don’t may have luck on their side on some occasions, they may be able to control their emotions on others, but it’s not going to happen all the time. There are going to be some things that take them out of their comfort zone and make it difficult to deliver.’

Chris Chapman is a Development Lead Officer (Talent and Performance Coaching) with sports coach UK and, as head coach of the England women’s rugby league team, is responsible for advising players on coping techniques – while often finding himself on the receiving end as well.

He is a firm believer that repetition can help those who suffer from stress in the sports arena.

‘I agree some personalities find it easier to deal with pressure more naturally, they have a better coping mechanism, are more laid-back. Psychological research will tell you that some people can be tipped out on to a field, and they will cope. They have higher resilience and self-belief.'
‘For me, pressure is perception. What seems like pressure initially, if you do it repeatedly, is not pressure.

‘From a coaching point of view, when you’re in your first international game there’s an awful lot of self-imposed pressure. When you’re on your 15th game, that pressure might change – not the pressure to perform, but how you feel about the situation.’

It’s all in the mind

British senior gymnastics champion Amy Tinkler is a perfect example of an athlete who thrives under pressure.

‘One of Amy’s main characteristics is that her mind is her greatest weapon,’ says Ruddock.

‘She has absolute control over her feelings and thoughts, and thrives in that competitive environment.

‘She can replicate the visualisation and breathing techniques in any single environment. It makes my job as a coach much easier.’

For those who are not so fortunate, it is the coach’s job to eradicate the doubts in the minds of their athletes to make them feel more comfortable.

Ruddock mentions the three Ds system – distractions, disruptions and differences that occur in a competitive environment.

‘All these external stimuli seem to change when you go to a competition,’ he explains. ‘It could be the brightness of the lights or the colour of the lighting, it could be the temperature in the arena, the feel of the equipment or the mats.

‘When you accumulate all these hundreds of things that are different to that athlete at that one time, there’s no wonder some of them are thrown out of their comfort zone. It is this changing environment that is often enough to trigger what is effectively a negative response and a fear of failure.’
Out of your comfort zone

There is no magical solution to the problem, and sadly, no quick fix for those unfortunate souls who disintegrate at the first sign of stress. But there is some light at the end of the tunnel.

Ruddock explains that coaches will try to mimic the feeling of stress and gut-churning tension experienced in the time before and during an athlete’s moment on the big stage – whether that is the Olympic Games final or a child’s first big competition in the school hall.

It is one of the biggest challenges a coach faces, he claims.

‘To induce the reaction of sweaty palms, an increased heart rate, the feeling that they didn’t sleep the night before, that is all very difficult to achieve.

‘We are training in the gym 24–31 hours a week, it has been our home for 10 years, and the gymnasts are comfortable in that environment. Even if I try to challenge that, it is still going to be different to what they are going to feel on competition day.

‘Michael Phelps’ coach wrote a book on it, detailing the great lengths he would go to to put Phelps under pressure and make him feel uncomfortable. One of the most famous is when he intentionally stood on his goggles before he swam in an event so he got used to that scenario if it ever arose, which I believe it did once in an Olympic final.’

One technique Ruddock uses in his training involves messing with the warm-up timings.

‘There are different times an athlete can warm up before competing. Sometimes, an athlete has 15 minutes on an apparatus, in another competition 12. What we do is cut it in half so, immediately, what we are doing in our home environment is challenging them to warm up in a shorter period of time so they get used to being rushed, though essentially, what happens on the day is they have 50% more time.’

Failing to prepare is preparing to fail

Ruddock and Chapman employ a whole bunch of techniques to take their athletes out of their comfort zone and test their mental focus so competition day is not a total shock to the system.

And they are in agreement that there are countless minor distractions that can throw an athlete off kilter and contribute to underperformance.

‘The likelihood is that when you are young, you are going to struggle with those external pressures, but you learn from the process,’ says Ruddock.

‘It is the coach’s job to educate their athletes or players as they get older, and help them adapt in those environments.’

‘What you are aiming to do is deliver the best possible result in the worst possible conditions. If you can do that, if you can cover all those bases, then the athlete is going to fly.’

‘Preparation is paramount’ is the message Chapman is keen to get across. Simply put, the better prepared you are, the better you will cope.

‘Every individual has got different experiences so each person needs their own support,’ he says.

‘There are a lot of processes and structures we put together to reduce pressure.'
‘The more information they know about travelling to an event and different competitions, for example, the more it helps reduce anxiety and perceptions of pressure.’

After spending time with individuals in one-on-one sessions talking about what their perceptions of pressure are, Chapman and his coaching staff will run through the minutiae of what to expect leading up to the game, going as far as visiting the venue beforehand or recording it on video to eradicate potential pressure points.

‘Simple things like where to go through the gates and where to set up are all helpful information if players are conscious of time. It doesn’t take much to have a traffic delay so if you can’t find the warm-up area or have been allocated a different field to warm up on, that 25 minutes impacts on their 90 minutes’ preparation time and can create pressure.

‘So we give them two things – the first is as much information as possible to remove that pressure; the second is activities that get them used to working under constraints, such as training a bit quicker, reducing the warm-up times.’

Mind games: Ruddock is a big believer in taking athletes out of their comfort zone

Britain’s stressed-out society

During his 12 years as a PE teacher, Chapman witnessed first-hand the worrying extent to which children were becoming more anxious.

The increased susceptibility to stress-related conditions is a by-product of modern society, and it has exacerbated the problem of struggling to deal with pressure in sport.
'I noticed people becoming more emotionally aware and more insecure and worried. Things play on people’s minds more often now, and in my experience, people appear less likely to cope,’ says Chapman.

‘It sounds almost contradictory as, on the other hand, people want to talk about mental health and are more honest – in the media, in professional sport and the profile around sport. Players are more likely to come forward with how they feel mentally because they want to be the best they can be.

‘Knowing what you are dealing with as a coach makes it so much easier. As the adage goes, if the athlete knows you care, it’s more important than they care what you know – the fact you value what they feel is important.’

**Golden rules**

So what have we learnt? The coach must prepare their athletes so they are familiar with how pressure-cooker situations feel, planning and developing pressurised training methods.

They must form a strong relationship with their athletes so they can develop coping strategies specific to the individual so they feel comfortable in any environment.

‘An athlete-coach relationship is essential,’ says Ruddock. ‘A good coach will know their athlete inside out. They will know from their body language how they are feeling straight away.’

And we know that coaches nowadays must be part-time psychologists as well as the fount of all knowledge in their chosen sport. They can no longer allow athletes to use ‘I felt stressed’ as an excuse for underperformance.

‘The environmental and psychological development of the individual is a fundamental responsibility of the coach, and just as important as the physical, technical and tactical development,’ says Chapman.

With all this in mind, maybe there is hope yet for the athlete who would normally ‘bottle it’ on the big occasion. With a good coach on side, practised in the techniques of how to deal with pressure, an athlete can become equipped to strike gold, rather than have to settle for silver or bronze.

**Ruddock’s top tips**

1. Understand the distractions, disruptions and differences that your athlete will face on competition day. List them all. Discuss them with your athlete so they know what to expect. No surprises!
2. Don’t neglect areas such as travel time, sleep quality, nutrition and fatigue when it comes to performance gains and the athlete’s ‘feel-good factor’ on competition day. Psychology is not just about the technical.
3. When training, place your athletes in pressurised situations where they feel uncomfortable. They need to be able to deliver the best possible result in the worst possible conditions.
4. Practise competition protocol frequently, and do your best to mimic the stimulus that your athletes will feel on the day.

5. Educate the athlete to understand that competitions are the ultimate training sessions. Mistakes will be made, but these are essential lessons to generate optimal performances in the future.

What do you think of this post? Let us know by leaving a comment below.

This blog is also available as a podcast on a number of platforms including Itunes. Listen here.

Login to follow, share, comment and participate. Not a member? Join for free now.

tags: pressure, stress, high-pressure