

PERFORMANCE PSYCHOLOGY: CHOKING, ANXIETY AND TEAM COHESION BY CONRAD COMER.

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As players past and present, most of us have experienced days on the field when nothing seems to go right. We get caught out of position, miss tackles and drop simple balls that we would normally take with ease in training. The various errors often happen in the same important game when they count the most. Athletes, who have dealt with much greater acute stress in the past, somehow lose the ability to make clear decisions. Worse still, the collective response of the team, as a whole, folds under this pressure at the same time.

To examine the phenomenon of collective team choking, we first need to take a look at individual stress response within a rugby context. At a glance, choking is simply a progressive deterioration in our game-state performance. Unfortunately, this deterioration increases with the relative importance of the performance itself. The greater the emotional importance of the game, the more likely choking will occur. If we do not implement coping strategies to deal with this, choking can become a learnt pattern of behaviour.

Choking takes place when our cognitive processing increases. In short, we think too much. Cognitive anxiety and over-arousal can have catastrophic effects on a player's performance. The catastrophe theory suggests that an athlete's performance will improve as physiological arousal increases, but only up to a point. When arousal becomes too high, performance can fall away rapidly. Many individual factors can have an influence on an athlete's capability to cope with pressure. Trait anxiety relates to a permanent emotional disposition, a kind of player's worry gauge. This relates directly to a player's cognitive state anxiety (3), or his propensity to worry or have consistent negative thoughts. Each individual has his or her own natural starting point

on a scale ranging from complete relaxation to breakdown. If player X's natural starting point is higher up the scale than player Y's, as stress increases, player X will reach breakdown sooner and more often than Y.

What follows then is the recognition of the relative state of anxiety of individual players. We can associate the personality type of an individual with his propensity to show early signs of overt stress. These can be placed into two categories. The first is the Paratelic characteristics of focusing only on the present, seeking out increasing levels of arousal and enjoyment. The flip-side of this is the Telic characteristics of seriousness, over planning and an aversion to high arousal.

There are two main schools of thought when we think about how arousal can influence performance. The first relates to a physiological response, where an increase in arousal leads to tightening of skeletal muscle and a loss of co-ordination. The second involves a narrowing of the attentional field. This means that when arousal levels increase, an athlete's ability to process incoming information decreases. In short, he becomes blinkered.

Explicit learning (5) occurs when we consciously rehearse a task by breaking it down step by step. The more we practise, the easier and quicker the task is to perform. This type of activity takes place in the left hemisphere of our brains. When the task finally becomes automatic, the right side of the brain takes over. The left hemisphere struggles to cope with the increased arousal, speeding up and becoming jumbled. As the left hemisphere works ever faster, in an increasingly uncontrolled state, it begins to affect our physiological and emotional states. This results in players becoming less task directed, getting a tightening of muscle movements and producing negative thoughts.

Athletes who succeed under pressure experience a great deal of left hemisphere activity when performing a skill. It is a feeling associated with 'non-thinking'. When the pressure is on, we begin to question our abilities and start thinking about what we are doing. This re-triggers the explicit learning system.

PREVENTION.

Zen: Do not try harder or concentrate more, relax and think less. Watch footage of yourself when you performed the skill at an optimum level. Imprint this in your memory and resort to this film in your head when things start to go wrong on the field. If the skill is complex, try focusing on one area only. This takes the emphasis away from the left hemisphere.

Selective memory and positive thinking: practise focusing on your successes and best plays. Develop shutting-out techniques for those performances which didn't quite go to plan.

Centering down: This is contained in Nideffer's strategy (6) for shifting from left to right brain activity immediately prior to a performance. Penalty kicking is a perfect example.

1. Create a stable and balanced body position.
2. State a clear intention of what *will* happen.
3. Choose an environmental focus point, which is somewhere where you can refocus your attention, shutting out all external distractions from the task at hand.
4. **Breath.** Carry out slow, intentional inhalations and exhalations. Think of nothing else but the breathing.
5. **Muscle deactivation.** With each exhalation, relax a muscle group.
6. **Centre down.** Locate your most stable physical position and try to move inside your body. Try to imagine that you have perfect balance and that you are in perfect harmony with the playing surface.
7. **Process cues.** To shift from left to right brain activity, use process cues with your breathing. Use words that reflect the cause rather than the result. (E.g. balance, control, flow, power, speed etc.)
8. **Channelling.** Gather in all the energy from the body's extremities and direct it to one focal point.
9. **Smile.** Relax and enjoy the feeling of power, control and calmness your body has. Your physical presence will have changed. You will exude confidence and place doubt and fear in the opposition.

For individuals who suffer polar ends of a cognitive State Anxiety scale, a method we use at the South West Academy is something we call 'Zone Walking'. The player in question uses music as a method of centering down. He makes himself a playlist of songs that empower or calm him (depending on whether he needs to be aroused or relaxed), and he listens to this as he takes the field prior to the warm-up. He then walks his zone on the pitch. By slowly tracing the areas of the field that the player wishes to dominate before the game, he positively charges his image of the playing field *before* the game begins. Whilst doing this, the player repeats 'power words' such as speed, dominance, aggression, force, control etc.

These methods are effective for individuals with specific anxiety/arousal requirements. However, there are techniques we can incorporate into a more general team preparation:

- Try to outline each player's individual role in the team and involve all members in every aspect of game preparation and their impact on the potential success of the team.
- Team-mates should be encouraged to train with, support and help to improve the skills of players in the same position as themselves.
- Follow the SMART rules of goal setting – **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**ttainable, **R**ealistic and **T**imed. Group goals should be made a priority in order to focus

players towards a common achievement. This should improve satisfaction within the performance direction and pull the team closer together as a unit.

- A team should have an identity. Money spent on sponsored training kit, team branding and marketing all go towards making individuals feel part of a respected unit.
- Break up exclusive groups within the group. This applies to management and senior players as much as any others. Cliques are counter-productive and will negatively affect players excluded, especially young or new players low down in the team status rankings. Rugby is a confidence game and cliques kill confidence in those outside. The only clique good for a team is when it involves the team as a whole.
- Constant changing of personnel breeds feelings of insecurity and mistrust. Coaches should try, whenever possible, to develop team rapport. This is difficult when high turnover affects player bonding.
- Team meetings should be held in order to allow players to express themselves both positively and negatively. Players shouldn't feel that their opinions would affect their status or selection.

Much has been written on the subject of team building and its relation to performance improvements. For players, it breaks down the boundaries of difference between groups of people from very different backgrounds. In simple terms, the better players know each other, the more comfortable they will be in each other's presence, the better understanding of each other they will have on the pitch.

It is a difficult to express adequately how important the creation of a collective team conscience is. Moreover, the position that coaches and management have to play in creating this sense of unity may have a greater impact on the outcome of a match than some of the more traditional training methods.

References.

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