



*Providing information to individuals and teams seeking optimal performance*

## Handling Pressure, Part 2

In the October Issue of *Performance Enhancement News*, we began to discuss handling pressure. We defined what a pressure situation is and listed the various symptoms that can occur when you are faced with such a situation. We noted that most people perform better under at least some pressure and that the key to handling pressure is managing the effects so that the performer is more likely to get the task at hand done successfully. Finally, we identified four strategies for managing the effects of pressure and discussed two of these, relaxation and attention management, in some detail.

We will spend the bulk of this issue focused on self-talk and imagery and how they can be used to help you manage the effects of pressure.

### *Self-Talk*

We have examined the impact of our internal dialogue (i.e., self-talk) in previous issues of the newsletter. In these issues, we discussed a strategy for identifying your self-talk, determining its effect on your performance, and how to manage your self-talk.

Self-talk can either hurt or help in pressure situations. If you review the mental responses to pressure listed in the October issue, you will see that three of these usually have self-talk at their core: regret/worry, racing thoughts (or the experience of having too many thoughts at once), and negative thinking. The first two contribute to a poor performance by distracting you from the task at hand.

Self-talk can also impact your performance by directing your attention to subtle aspects of your performance. If your self-talk is generally positive in nature, you are more likely to direct your attention to productive actions and additional productive thoughts. The converse is true as well - negative thoughts will tend to direct your attention to non-productive actions and additional non-

productive thoughts. You may have had days when you cannot seem to do anything right. Those days may have started with some negative thoughts that just led to a cycle of mistakes; more negative thinking; more mistakes; more negative thinking; etc.

Strategies from previous issues can help you start to manage your self-talk. For times when you are distracted by either regret/worry or racing thoughts, **thought stoppage** combined with the **basic refocusing routine** from last issue are good strategies to start with. We also noted in the last issue that **regulated breathing** may be helpful in this situation. For negative thinking, the strategies of **countering** and **redirection** can help you change your thoughts from negative to productive.

### *Imagery*

Finally, last year, we began the discussion of using your ability to create or recreate an experience in your mind (i.e., imagery) as a performance tool. We discussed several uses for imagery in sports including learning new skills, practicing already developed skills, and solving technique problems. It was also noted that that the combination of physical practice and imagery leads to more performance improvement than physical practice alone.

Imagery can also play a role in helping you manage pressure situations more effectively through the mental rehearsal of those situations. For example, identify a pressure situation in your sport. It could be performing in front of a large crowd, having to make a free throw to send a game into overtime, making a field goal to win a game, or anything that you see as a pressure situation. The important part is that it must be an activity from your sport.

Once you have identified a situation, find a quiet place, close your eyes, and take some slow, deep breaths. Then imagine yourself in the situation vividly by including

as many of your senses as you can. Then, see yourself managing the pressure successfully. If you see yourself making a mistake, redo the imagery exercise, this time seeing yourself doing it correctly. Always end an imagery session by seeing yourself successfully manage the pressure situation. The goal is to become familiar with ways to handle the pressure situation so that when you are faced with the situation in real life, you will know what to do and you will have seen yourself handling the pressure successfully.

As usual, due to space limitations, we have only scratched the surface of the topic of handling pressure. There are many ways to effectively manage pressure situations. The important thing is to find what works for you. Regardless of what strategies you choose, remember: managing pressure requires a proactive approach. In other words, for the techniques to work when you need them, you must practice before you need them (just like physical practice).

If you review the techniques we have looked at, you will also notice that they allow you to start taking control of what you have control over: **your actions**. Slowing your breathing down, attending to what is important now, making your self-talk productive, and mentally rehearsing managing pressure situations should help once you have experience using them both through practice and in actual pressure situations.

Note: All of the newsletters referenced can be downloaded from the website.

For more information about this topic or any other topic related to mental skills or sport and performance psychology, contact your local sport psychologist.

**Give the gift of mental toughness to the performers in your life this holiday season. The next Mental Toughness Boot Camp starts in January!**

This bi-monthly publication is being offered to you free of charge. You may share this newsletter with others as long as it is distributed in its entirety. If you prefer not to receive a copy, either call 256-551-4479 or send an email to [moncierj@uasomh.uab.edu](mailto:moncierj@uasomh.uab.edu). Use these same methods to be placed on the mailing list. All back issues of *Performance Enhancement News* can be downloaded at no charge at: [www.monciersportpsychology.com](http://www.monciersportpsychology.com).

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### **Announcement: UAB Sport Psychology's Winter Mental Toughness Boot Camp**

Developing mental toughness is a process that is only now becoming more completely understood. UAB Sport Psychology has created a course to help athletes develop the skills consistent with the emerging literature regarding mental toughness.

This course focuses on helping the individual athlete develop self-awareness of mental strengths and areas needing more work. Additionally, participants will learn a variety of mental skills used by elite athletes in order to further develop their own mental toughness, such as controlling emotions, self-talk, and focus; managing energy; and using imagery as a performance tool. These skills form the basis of the individual athlete's pre-performance routines, regrouping plans, and general mental preparation strategies that will allow him or her to perform to the best of his or her abilities. Participants will also learn ways to incorporate mental toughness training into physical practices and their life in general in order to make the most out of both.

The course will start on January 19, 2010. It will meet on Tuesday nights for 10 weeks at UAB-Huntsville from 6:00-7:30 pm. The course will be limited to 25 athletes ages 15 and older. There will be homework between each class. At the end of the course, each participant will have a notebook that they can use to continue to guide them as they strengthen their mental toughness long after the class is over. For a more detailed description and for registration materials, go to [www.monciersportpsychology.com](http://www.monciersportpsychology.com) and follow the "Mental Toughness Course" link. Registration ends January 15, 2010.

You can now hear Dr. Moncier on the radio on WUMP (730 AM or 103.9 FM) at 3:30 on Tuesday afternoons during "The Johnny 'Ballpark' Franks Show." If you are not in the North Alabama area or do not have access to a radio at work, you can listen to the show by directing your computer's web browser to [www.730ump.com](http://www.730ump.com) and clicking on the "On Air Now" link at the upper right corner of the page.