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Handling Pressure, Part 3 (This One's for the Coaches)

On December 26, 2009 Urban Meyer announced that he was stepping down as the head football coach of the defending national champion Florida Gators (Bryant, 2009). He cited concerns about his health as the primary reason for this stunning move. The next day, he announced that instead of leaving, he was taking a leave of absence. Many in the sports world criticized Meyer for his "flip-flopping." Others, including myself, saw this as an opportunity to highlight what most coaches already know: The pressures of coaching impact coaches at least as much as the pressures of performing impact their athletes.

We discussed the important concept of handling pressure in the October and December 2009 issues of *Performance Enhancement News*. We defined what a pressure situation is and listed the various symptoms that can occur when you are faced with such a situation. We also noted that most people perform better under at least some pressure. The key to successfully handling pressure is managing the effects of pressure so that the performer is more likely to get the task done. Finally, we identified four strategies for managing the effects of pressure (relaxation, attention management, self-talk, and imagery) and discussed each of these in some detail. Both issues can be downloaded from the website.

In my experience, most fans tend to see coaches in one-dimensional terms - they are either "good" coaches or "bad" coaches based upon wins and losses. As many of you are aware, the pressure to perform, again translated into wins and losses, can take a huge toll on coaches, which is often invisible to the general public.

The two symptoms attributed to Urban Meyer, chest pain and loss of appetite, can certainly be medically-based and from what I have read, it appears he is being monitored closely by medical personnel.

However, if you have read the last two newsletters, you know that chronic stress (another word for pressure) can not only lead to medical symptoms, but can also lead to the suppression of the immune system, which makes the individual much more susceptible to illness. Chronic stress can also be associated with psychological symptoms such as impulsive decision-making, irritability, loss of focus, and proneness towards substance abuse.

Unmanaged, chronic stress can lead to burnout. Anyone experiencing burnout (coaches, athletes, business people, etc.) tends to leave his or her job. You may recall that the very successful professional football coach, Dick Vermeil, specifically cited burnout as the reason for his retirement from coaching in 1982, only one year after taking the Philadelphia Eagles to the Super Bowl.

Recent articles have highlighted the pressures of coaching (Estes, 2009; Staples, 2010). Andy Staples refers to college football head coaching as "the most dangerous job in sports." His article references the health problems of numerous college head coaches including Andy Talley (coach of the current FCS football champion Villanova Wildcats), Jim Calhoun (who only recently returned to coaching UConn's men's basketball team after a medical leave of absence), and Skip Prosser (who died after returning from a recruiting trip for Wake Forest in 2007).

The articles by Estes and Staples also highlight what coaches are doing to stay healthier. Estes (2009) reported that Coach Nick Saban works to manage his stress from coaching by sticking to a routine, eating healthy, and staying in shape. Many of the coaches interviewed for Staples' (2010) article work out regularly. Chuck Noll (winner of four Super Bowls as head coach of the Pittsburgh Steelers) reportedly managed his coaching stress through relaxation activities such as flying planes, cooking, traveling, and boating.

With such high-profile and successful coaches admitting to being impacted by the stress of their job, my hope is that this will serve as a wake-up call for coaches at all levels. Adopting more active stress management strategies will ideally help coaches to remain healthier and to continue coaching for many years.

A common question I hear from coaches is, "How do I teach my athletes ways to manage pressure?" My usual response is, "How do you manage pressure?" Coaches are important role models for their athletes. Most of the coaches I have worked with understand this, but often do not make the connection that how they manage stress frequently translates into how their athletes manage stress. ("Do as I say, not as I do.") Therefore, when I am having the "handling pressure" discussion with a coach, I usually begin by teaching him or her how to manage the pressure they experience when trying to perform at their best.

So, far from being critical of Coach Meyer for his admission that he has been impacted by the pressures of his job, I applaud him. I hope that every coach, no matter what the sport or level, is listening. Like any type of performing, becoming an effective coach takes hard work, lots of preparation and effort, and the ability to manage pressure and adverse situations effectively, in addition to the ability to lead others. Learning to manage the pressures of coaching will not only allow coaches to continue to do what most coaches love to do - coach - it will also allow them to stay healthier while they do it. Finally, it will also allow the coach to model handling pressure in a healthy and productive fashion for his or her athletes. You **know** your athletes are watching ...

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

References

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- Estes, G. (2009, December 28). Coaching in constant anxiety. *The Huntsville Times*, pp. D1, D3.
- Staples, A. (2010, January 20). College football head coach: The most dangerous job in sports. Retrieved on February 1, 2010 from http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/2010/writers/andy_staples/01/19/coaches.danger/1.html.

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