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Fear in Sport (Part 2)

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In part one we looked at James Loehr's (1982) model of the Ideal Performance State which gave us a brief insight into the power of the mind-body connection. We came to understand that fear is an emotion that we attach to a certain situation based purely on our perception of that situation or of a past experience of that situation. We need to learn how to change this perception. We need to alter the mindset to overcome this fear.

So how can we do this? It requires time and dedication and most importantly "buy-in" to developing mental skills. Mental skills training and mental skill maintenance needs to be an integral part of any athletes daily training routines. It can no longer be considered an optional extra. I believe in a few simple steps to get the process of overcoming fear going.

1. Embrace The Fear – Never try to avoid what it is that you fear and never run from it. The emotions of fear are ever present and will affect your body's response. Running from fear only prolongs having to deal with the issue at hand and can further heighten the fear of this particular situation. If you want to succeed as an athlete then it is crucial that you overcome these fears. It is likely that you will never reach desired performance levels unless these fears are diminished. The simple reason being the extreme influence our emotional states have over our body's preparation and its execution. Therefore it is important that you decipher specifically what it is that you fear. Identify the fear in its entirety first. For example, an amateur golfer might fear chipping. The short game element of chipping is the event or series of events that this golfer fears. Take the general

ABOUT STUART PATTISON



I graduated from Rhodes University in South Africa with a Distinction in my Master of Social Science Degree in Psychology. Throughout my University Career I focused on

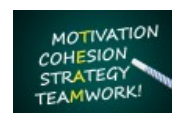
various strands of Psychology including Organisational, Industrial, Research and Sport Psychology. My Masters Thesis involved the development, implementation and analysis of a Mental Toughness Performance Training and Conditioning Programme for Young Cricketers. I am now the Owner and Managing Director of a company called Headstrong who are a group of Elite Performance Professionals. Headstrong provides athletes with the foundations needed to become professionals. In addition to running the business, I also head up the Sport Psychology Expert Division.

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fear and break it down and “unpack it” so to speak. What is it about this chipping that he fears? It is likely that past experiences caused this fear. The golfer will likely have experienced a series of undesirable or embarrassing outcomes as a result of their chipping. This past experience creates the fear and the vicious cycle explained earlier begins.

2. Change the perception of the feared experience and more importantly the experience of a failure – There is no such thing as failure, there is only feedback. We label certain events as failures because the outcome is a result different to what we initially expected or wanted.

Regardless of this, there will still be small successes in all of our “failures” but it is a matter of adjusting our mindset to look at the situation in this way. If a “failed” event helps us realise how not to perform or helps identify areas that need work, then surely this is a small victory. We are more self aware and knowledgeable than before. Athletes who are able to pick positives elements from negative scraps are the ones who will advance ahead of the rest and ultimately become mentally tough.

3. Recreate the failed experience – It is important to remember that fear is a perception of a particular event that we ourselves create. If we can create this fear then we can certainly manipulate particular situations to overcome this fear. We need to change our perception. We need to rewrite the blueprint. To start, use the information collected in step one of deciphering the specific fear. You will have already broken this fear down and identified the exact situation that is causing your anxiety. Now, what do you do with this information? Your training environment prepares you for your competitive events. Therefore the quality of your training environment determines the quality of your readiness to compete (refer to process orientation and outcome orientation). We need to expose ourselves to exact replicas of the event that causes anxiety. Therefore it is important that you recreate these events and put yourself through them during your practice times. It sounds simple but it is so easy to get distracted or look past the need to recreate these situations.

As you progress through these events the consequences of messing up are not as drastic as in competition and therefore you can practice the event over and over. By doing so you will slowly start to see small victories in this particular event. As you see more victories you start to gain greater confidence and self belief and your body begins moving more fluidly and smoother resulting in effective execution of the skills required, and the outcome eventually evolves into a positive one. The positive outcome (or the consecutive positive outcomes achieved through training), leads to a change in perception of this previously feared event. What you begin to see here is the opposite of the vicious fear cycle depicted earlier. Positive outcomes create self confidence which guide the correct body preparation which ultimately leads to successful mechanic execution resulting in further positive outcomes. This positive outcome further increases confidence and before soon you’ve found yourself in the zone (I will be writing up a small piece on the intricacies of the zone at a later stage)

4. “Just Breathe” – We have often been told, in moments of anxiety or fear, to take a few deep breaths. Very few people actually understand the physiological effect this small act has on calming us down. To understand this a little better we need to delve into some science for a small moment. In 1921 Otto Loewi, a German physiologist, discovered that by stimulating the vagus nerve, which released a substance he coined as *Vagusstoff (vagus substance)*, we could reduce our heart rates. Researchers continued to confirm that consistent mindset and behaviour maintenance can create positive snowball effects through a feedback loop linked to stimulating the vagus nerve.

Let us look at this a little deeper. What exactly is the vagus nerve? Vagus is a Latin word for wandering and the vagus nerve is known as the wandering nerve due to the extensive branch system diverging from two thick stems rooted in the cerebellum and brainstem that wander to the lowest viscera of your abdomen touching your heart and most major organs along the way. The vagus nerve constantly reports sensory information concerning the state of the body’s mind up to the brain. We have often heard people saying “trust your gut”, and while they again may not understand the true meaning of this phrase what they in essence are saying is “trust your vagus nerve”. Visceral feelings and gut instincts are emotional intuitions transferred up to the brain by means of the vagus nerve. The feedback loop mentioned earlier refers to messages being sent

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down from conscious mind as well as up from the vagus nerve. This loop system assists us in creating an inner calm state during times of safety or “fight-or-flight” state during times of trouble and adversity.

The vagusstoff was later identified as a neurotransmitter called acetylcholine. Stimulation of the vagus nerve triggers this neurotransmitter which in essence is a tranquilizer which we can administer ourselves by taking a few simple deep breaths. The key therefore to stimulating the vagus nerve and reducing our heart rate is deep diaphragmatic breathing. This self administering method is powerful for creating an inner calm state when needed and can further assist in reducing fear in competitive situations giving you grace when performing under pressure. Healthy vagal tone is indicated by a slight increase of heart rate when you inhale, and a decrease of heart rate when you exhale. Higher vagal tones are linked to physical and psychological wellbeing while lower vagal tones are linked to a negative wellbeing such as depressive states, negative moods, and even heart attacks. Healthy conditioned athletes will have a higher vagal tone due to aerobic breathing which ultimately lowers the resting heart rate.

All the physical responses from being afraid, nervous or anxious such as shaking hands, sweaty palms, dry mouth, upset stomach are all a result of our vagus nerve disengaging. Fortunately for us we have a small self administering system to override this and keep it engaged to perform well under pressure.

5. Understanding Process Orientation and Outcome Orientation – Understanding these two elements and the difference between the two is important not only for overcoming fear but for all mental skills required for elite performance enhancement. Let us begin with a simple definition of each orientation. Outcome orientation involves being entirely fixated and focused on the end result (the ultimate goal or final outcome – what we want to achieve). While this certainly plays an important part of achievement (because we need to have a target in place and understand where it is that we are going) the more effective orientation is that of process orientation. Process orientation simply involves focusing on the smaller steps, the every day mini goals and challenges and subscribes to the premise that the experience is the journey. The nature of process orientation revolves around saturating yourself in and enjoying the immediate moment. What is important to realise at this point is that the end goal is a direct bi-product of the process. Those people who focus solely on the end result forget the importance of quality investment in the process and their outcome therefore is not as good as it possibly could have been. The quality of the process depicts the quality of the outcome and it is therefore extremely necessary to focus on the small steps and the outcome will occur naturally. In reference to fear, this mentality is crucial. The 4 steps prior to this require process orientation. Athletes need to put into place various mental strategies and methods to overcome fear and focus on these processes every day. Eventually, as we saw in step 3, the fear will slowly subside.

6. Train Mentally – Finally, it is important that athletes start training mentally. It is no longer enough to just train physically. Sport has evolved immensely over the years and this ‘evolution’ affects the individuals who compete in these sporting endeavours in various ways. Performance standards have increased drastically within elite sport and the demands of the elite sporting environment places the athlete into highly stressful situations both physically and psychologically. “Such environments provide considerable stressors for the modern day performer due to greater media attention and increased sponsorship involvement, emphasising the importance of expanding the understanding of how individuals respond in stressful situations” (Hanton et al., 2003, p. 167). Sport at the highest level is heavily characterised by a demand to excel at superior levels and perform under conditions that are considered extremely demanding and testing. Athletes need to saturate themselves into a consistent mental training regime.

According to Lazarus (as cited in Lundqvist, 2006), when athletes encounter stressful situations or are faced with adversity (such as fear) during their competitive endeavours, the outcome in terms of positive or negative emotional responses and the resultant effects on the athlete’s performance will be largely influenced by their ability to successfully manage the internal and external demands perceived. This refers to the ability of the athlete to go beyond pure physical talent, skill and ability and tap into the mental side of performance enhancement and optimisation. Too many athletes

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overlook mental elements when faced with difficulty in performances because these types of adjustments cannot be seen and are therefore taken for granted. Whenever athletes are faced with situations that require an enhanced level of performance, the immediate reaction is generally to make an adjustment to all levels and phases of their physical training routine long before the mental aspect of performance is even considered. Every athletic contest is a contest of control, control of the delicate mind and body connection, yet athletes consistently and persistently continue to train harder and harder physically at the expense of mental training.

Final Thoughts

The advice presented throughout this paper only briefly touches on how to overcome fear. Fear is going to present itself in one way or another. As an athlete you will be faced with fear, it is inevitable. Don't mistake fear for being nervous. Being nervous is a good thing. Being nervous shows you that what you are about to do means something to you. Being nervous shows you that you understand the importance of what comes next. The nerves keep you on edge and keep you alert, they keep you in the game. Being nervous does not show us that we have self doubt or that we don't believe we can meet the expectations of the event to come. Fearing the event shows us this. Fear manifests reluctance and leaves us questioning our ability to perform well. Fear is debilitating.

As athletes we need to make a conscious effort to expel all fear from our performance environments. It starts with considering the points expressed in this article. Understand the mind-body connection and buy into the power of this relationship. Investment into this area will lay positive and solid foundations to build a greater performance potential on. Expose yourself to your fears and rewrite the blueprints for these particular situations. Focus on everyday process tasks. Live the process, love the process and believe in the process. Getting too ahead of yourself will allow the fear space to grow and evolve. Don't give it this chance! Finally, invest in mental training. Learn how to deal with setbacks, learn how to improve and regain focus and concentration and find your own zone, learn how to prepare for big events, learn how to deal with the critics, understands where your motivation comes from and what your "why" factor is. Mental training is elaborate and immense. Improving your knowledge and experience in this area will make dealing with and disintegrating fear so much easier. At the end of the day the choice is yours. You are the one competing, you are the one who experiences the competitive events and you are the one accountable for the results. Simple.

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