

The Art of Mental Training

Chapter 14

On Choking

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Leo-tai and I were discussing a national competition, which we'd just watched together.

"Have you ever noticed," he mused, "How sometimes, even when an athlete's performance seems to be going really well, that it's almost as if some sort of stress takes hold of their entire game and everything starts going downhill for them?"

How interesting I thought: *he's so right*. Why is it that big leads and strong advantages all seem to crumble and disappear under pressure sometimes? No player is immune to it; even great champions sometimes fall victim to it. In the end, even they will admit that, at one time or another; they too have "choked."

"So what causes it," I asked, "And what can be done to fight it? What about the guy in the tournament? Did he just suddenly become afraid of losing?"

"In a way, but not exactly, because a choking episode begins when a competitive situation threatens the athlete's ego," said Leo-tai. "It's a little like having a fear of failure – but choking goes beyond the fear because choking is the actual physical response that's triggered by the psychological threat to the ego. Choking is more than just having a fear of failure – fear is in your head. Choking happens when performance is actually affected by the nervousness, stress, and worries about looking bad if things go wrong. It's very different from the fear of facing a dangerous or life-threatening situation. These are subtle distinctions, but big differences."

"Yes," I admitted, "But I'm not sure that I can tell the difference."

"Perhaps that's because the physical symptoms brought on are so similar. But remember that their causes are different. Nervousness and stress in either situation will affect an athlete's breathing pattern to the point where the delivery of oxygen to the brain and muscles suffers, and he begins to feel anxiety. As an ineffective breathing pattern kicks in, his performance begins to suffer just when he needs his skills the most, just when the pressure's really on. However, choking is actually caused by an ego that's worried about looking bad, not by any real or perceived danger."

“So what could that champion have done?”

Leo-tai shook his head. “His mistake was that he let his fear of looking bad take hold and gain momentum; bringing on the nervousness and anxiety that caused the actual choking reaction. What he needed to do was to start using focused breathing, thus beginning to reduce anxiety on the spot. As one uses focused breathing one is able to begin to relax. Oxygen fills the body, reanimating the muscles and causing anxiety to subside. Suppleness returns, bringing renewed confidence with it. Feel the relaxation as you exhale; as you begin to bring anxiety under control, things begin to get better for you.”

Leo-tai switched off the TV.

“In these cases one must use focused breathing to help bring you back into control, back into the present, and to allow yourself to feel the pressure subside . . . But Danielsan, remember: since choking springs from your ego, it’s not enough to address the physical symptoms alone, although it’s OK to start with them. As soon as focused breathing begins to help, you must also take control back from the ego.”

“Go on,” I said.

“To do this, momentarily pick a focus point in your immediate environment and fix your eyes on it as you continue your focused breathing. This will help shift the focus away from yourself and to refocus on the particular task at hand. The outside focus helps us to reduce the ego focus—which is really what is causing all the problems in the first place . . . Once an athlete really understands what causes choking he can set out to shut it down so that he can immediately begin to refocus on the challenge at hand, and keep it from getting worse. Once you see choking for what it really is, you can avoid the experience happening to you by using this strategy. Learn to leave your ego outside of your event, or it will always end up getting in the way.”

Remember: Choking is caused by an ego that is afraid of looking bad. You must learn to leave your ego outside of your event.