

# The Art of Mental Training

## Chapter 15

### Keep Your Cool

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I had been several years out of the military—and I'd just been put through the mill. The Federal agents questioning me reviewed their notes, exchanged glances with each other, and then turned towards me.

“You're free to go,” said the Special Agent in Charge, “That'll do.”

I glanced at my watch, surprised to realize that over two hours had gone by without my noticing. During those hours I had been grilled non-stop by all the top supervisory agents in the District Office. I supposed the reason was because I was up against a lot of strong competitors. At any rate, I rose, nodded my thanks, and headed for the door.

Just before I reached it, the lead agent called me back.

"Oh, just one more thing," he said. "I have one final question, if you don't mind?"

"Not without my lawyer." I told him, with a straight face.

They all smiled; one chuckled. (Wow, I thought: these people do have a sense of humor.)

“I've noticed that you've had some valuable training and experience as a sports mental trainer. I can't help wondering if you were using any of those mental techniques that you teach athletes during the interview today.”

I looked at him straight in the eyes.

“Absolutely,” I told him. “Of course I used mental techniques today.”

Later he told me how he noticed that the pressure that the panel was so good at creating and that they had used so successfully to rattle other applicants, had appeared to have had no effect on me at all . . . And so began my career as a Special Agent.

Pressure. Intense pressure. I had known plenty of it in the military. If there's one thing that most athletes will tell me they want their mental training programs to help them with right away, it's being able to perform better under pressure.

Of course, feeling the pressure of competition is not in itself a bad thing; it can actually help to bring out the best in you. It's really how you deal with it that makes the difference. Whatever you may think, the truth is that *all* the pressure you feel really comes from inside yourself. Once you understand this, you can begin to free yourself to do what you are really capable of.

So, how does stress and pressure adversely affect performance?

Coordination, concentration, and judgment are all affected. Your heart beats faster, your breathing speeds up, you can't think as clearly as usual. Often, pressure creates tension that can push you to try and get through something quicker. Yet when you yield to this impulse to rush, you'll actually perform worse.

Not knowing how to handle pressure will certainly affect overall performance. This can be the undoing of any performer: whether in the boardroom, on the concert stage, or while engaged in top-level sports. The first thing you have to learn is how to stay cool. This is probably the biggest single difference between a typical competitor and a mental athlete.

The mental athlete has learned how to stay calm and task-focused under pressure. He knows that staying cool is part of his success formula. So he sets out to manage the pressure—which begins by first recognizing that it's OK to feel the pressure. He doesn't deny his nerves, but he doesn't give into them either.

Here are some of the tried-and-tested techniques the mental athlete should learn to use in order to help him to stay calm and task-focused under pressure:

Learn to concentrate and use focused breathing. The athlete can bring himself back to the present moment by training himself to use his breathing to help secure control when the heat is on.

In pressure situations, make sure to let the air reach into the very bottom of your lungs. Fill every corner of your body with life-giving, life-enhancing oxygen. Then, as you release the breath, release any tension and anxiety along with it. Notice the feeling of release—and the feeling of control. Focused breathing will help reduce the pressure and keep you grounded in the present.

An athlete can also help take the pressure off by using muscle relaxation skills. Having developed this skill through practice outside the competitive environment, the athlete equips himself with an invaluable tactic to use against the building tension and pressure that he may be feeling in a competitive environment. The ability to instantly relax muscles not only relieves tension, but also serves to calm your mind and reduce the

pressures you're feeling. With a little practice you can get really good at triggering physical relaxation quickly. Be sure to learn and practice the induction technique introduced in Chapter 7, which is extremely popular among the world's top athletes and performers.

Some athletes find that they deal best with performance pressures by using coping affirmations. The ability to talk yourself through a pressure situation is an important skill. Coping affirmations are powerful because they help you to deal with the pressure—not to pretend that the pressure doesn't exist. Many champions create and have their own personal affirmations. (*I'm good; I'm fast; I'm strong; this is my time; believe; I dominate.*) What they may be doesn't matter as long as they help you take the pressure off yourself. Create three quick affirmations (positive statements) you can fire off to yourself to complement the breathing and relaxation techniques mentioned above.

Another method some athletes use to deal with pressure is simply thinking about something that relaxes them. Some do this while wearing headphones listening to whatever it may be that helps them take the pressure off themselves. They may be sitting in their chair at a crossover in a serious international tennis match, but they're actually no longer there. In their minds, they have transported themselves somewhere else, perhaps to a tranquil mountain stream where they sit peacefully as the sun reflects in the running water. How's that for a simple approach that can make a big difference? Be sure to take the time to practice and develop this type of mental focus.

Some champions admit to using a technique from sports psychology where they allow themselves to let go of the need to achieve any particular outcome. This is all about feeling the pressure—and then warmly accepting it. Such athletes approach performances with the exhilaration of knowing that all their hard training is about to pay off and that it's time to go out and enjoy performing their sport. They set out to compete with the feeling that they have nothing to lose. Confident that their years of solid training will take over, they let go of any remaining worries and set out to perform with uninhibited abandon. Some athletes talk about having experienced their greatest moment in sports through releasing themselves from any fear of failure.

In other words, not being focused on the outcome allowed them to become enjoyably absorbed in the process. One can sense this attitude at times when a youthful challenger "takes on" a top seed. He (or she) is almost carefree with the sense that they, at least, have nothing to lose. Some spectacular upsets have happened when a challenger has convinced himself to release the weight of his own expectations in this way. Afterwards, such athletes sometimes describe how they weren't worried about doing well, how they became completely immersed in the activity of the moment. Their chances of achieving the outcome that they desired increased dramatically when they took the pressure off themselves and let go of the need to achieve any specific outcome.

Other athletes have a ritual or pre-game routine that they like to stick with and that helps them deal with the pressure. If this is you (and it works) why mess with it?

And finally, one other approach is to recall a time when you managed a pressurized situation really well. Go back in your mind's eye and take note of exactly what you did right. What worked? What did you do? Were you still for a while before going into the match? Were you able to lose yourself in the moment? What was your self-talk like? What was going on inside your head that helped you reduce the pressure? Pinpoint it. Noticing the things that helped you deal with pressure in the past can make it possible for you to access those techniques again. A competitor who is not feeling the pressure can easily end up defeating one who actually plays better than they do. Learning how to manage pressure can help you outperform others. If there is anything that worked for you and helped you with pressure in the past, pinpoint it, and then keep using it.

**Remember: Pressure is mental. Learn to view performance pressure as a challenge that can be managed by using mental techniques, and pre-game routines.**