

# How to Perform Under Pressure

Adapted from an article by Seth M. Quealy, MS

**Confidence** is a fickle beast! It can come and go with the smallest of mistakes and successes. For example, let's say that things have been going well and you are feeling good about your performance. Then all of a sudden a simple miss and a turnover have you thinking; "what's going on", "I don't want the ball", "will I ever get my finishing touch back", "I stink", "I hope this goes in". Now I know you're thinking, "How did he know that?" Well, we've all been there and it's not fun. But the good news is it doesn't have to be that way! There are mental skills you can develop to get your confidence back, improve your performance and your mental game. They will help you become more mentally tough and better equipped to perform with confidence when it counts. Elite Premiership players, when asked what they felt separated them from the rest of the field and they replied without hesitation, "the mental game." You see, the goal of the mental game is confidence and mental toughness. These are vital components of each individual's and team's success. It's no coincidence that the best players of our day and arguably all-time are that way, just because of natural talent and hard work. They are that way because of the time they spend working on how and what they think. Have you noticed that you play better when you are confident and believe you can do it. Top class pros, know the importance of what the fact that how you think affects how you play. This part of your game must be practiced & developed just like dribbling, tackling, heading, passing & finishing. When you speak with your team, realize that the mental game is something you have to practice just as much as the physical game. The following **7 mental skills** will help you develop and maintain confidence under pressure and ultimately empower you to perform your best on a more consistent basis.

**Awareness** - This is the base or foundational skill in the mental game. I'm talking about body awareness and mental awareness. Our bodies are very good indicators of what's going on in our heads. How many of you get sweaty palms when you're nervous, or your hands get cold? What about butterflies or a tight stomach? Maybe you yawn like Apollo Ohno or get headaches because your stress is manifesting itself in tension in your neck and shoulders. These are great keys or indicators that you can use to remind yourself to breathe, calm down and get your thoughts on the appropriate things. If you are aware of what's going with your body and your thinking then you can start to control it and be proactive about getting your game back on track. Remember, "you can't be in control of your performance until you are in control of yourself." It's all about compensating and adjusting. You can't get back on track if you don't know you're off! So start recognizing these indicators and get control. The first step to correcting a problem is recognizing that one even exists!

**Breathing** - Now that you are aware of those mind and body indicators use your breathing to get control of yourself. Breathing is the easiest skill, you already know how to do it so use it to your advantage! There are two types of breaths 1) Release Breath - Take a big breath and let it out, this gets more oxygen in your body and gets some tension out. 2) Trust Breath - This is a more calm and gentle

breath and helps you feel more in control. As you focus on your breathing and slowing it down you will be getting back in the moment and in a better place to think properly.

**Managing the Moment** - Managing the moment is one of the most crucial parts of playing with confidence and the mental game! A lot of the other skills, including the ones we are talking about here, are directly related to it. The goal is to get to the point where you use them together to help you be in the moment and play with confidence. When faced with a pressure situation, game winning penalty, important corner kick, long throw ins, or just getting your game confidence back, we often think back to prior mistakes or what we think "should" have happened. Then we start thinking and believing it's going to happen again. We also think ahead about what we "think or feel" has to happen. These types of thoughts cause tension, about things that are out of your control and virtually take you out of the game and the important moment. This almost guarantees you will mess up. Slow down and breathe! Have the mentality to play "one pass or ball possession at a time." Play in the "NOW" as that is the only play that matters and the only one you have any control over. Some players say, after a poor first half, missing several key scoring opportunities, "I have to have a short memory when it comes to the first half, or it will mess up my play in the second" Many important games are won when teams change their attitude and come out strongly in the second half of the game.

**Thought Stoppage** - This one is easy. Once you have recognized that your thinking is not what it should be you simply say STOP. Think of a stop sign and don't think that thought anymore. Recognize what's going on, say stop, slow down & breathe.

**Positive Self Talk** - Once you have stopped the thought replace it with something productive and positive. The mind can only think of one thing at a time so decide to be positive and turn it around. For starters, you could just say the opposite of what you were thinking. Replace "I missed the last one so I'm going to miss this one" with "I'll get the next one" or "I'm an excellent goal scorer. This one's going in." Studies have found that positive, confident thoughts improve motor skills. Therefore the opposite is true, negative doubting thoughts make you play/perform below your ability! In the late 1800's, psychologist William James said, "The greatest discovery of my generation is that a human being can alter his life by altering his attitudes of mind." Choose to alter your life and game by choosing to be positive! I guarantee you will be astonished at the result and the surge of confidence you will feel.

**Preparation** – Winning is the culmination of several factors. Joe Paterno said, "The will to win is important, but the will to prepare is vital." What he is saying is that will and talent alone are not enough. If you want to be great you must be willing to prepare and work harder than your competition. By preparing the right way you can go into battle knowing that you have done all you can to be ready. This is a great source of confidence and power. Trust in your preparation and let the challengers come. An amazing examples of the power of preparation, are that of Lindsey Vonn, the 2010 downhill Olympic gold medalist. Talk about handling pressure, they basically hung the gold around her neck before the race.

Add to that the fact that two weeks prior she had a nasty crash and sustained a serious shin injury. She hadn't skied on it since and wasn't sure she would be able to ski at all. After her incredible gold medal performance she said that she just trusted in her preparation, and what she had been doing all year and went for it. Her ability to be confident in her preparation and abilities helped her perform her best. "I just trusted in what I had done all year up to this point. I worked my moves and kept a cool head." Lindsey Vonn's, was an emotional victory having worked long and hard and taken second so many times. Vince Lombardi expressed, "I firmly believe that any man's finest hour, the greatest fulfillment of all that he holds dear, is the moment when he has worked his heart out in a good cause and lies exhausted on the field of battle - victorious."

**Attitude** - The great thing is you get to decide how and what you think. Concentration camp survivor Victor E. Frankl , "everything can be taken from a man but one thing: The last of his freedoms - to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way." Nowhere in the rule book of life or any sport does it say that because you didn't get the job done or you made a few mistakes, you must meltdown and be discouraged. Keep your head up and focus on what you can do. Attitude is a decision! Lou Holtz said, "**Ability is what you're capable of doing, Motivation determines what you are willing to do, Attitude determines how well you will do it.**" Decide to do it well, whatever it is. Commit to giving everything you have and never give up on you chances. Choose your own way!

**Conclusion**. All of these skills can help you gain and maintain confidence. They must be worked on during practice so you will be able to use them in a game. Its not rocket science but it does take work, patience and determination. As you work at it you will start to see a difference. You will have more fun and you will maximize your potential. Remember, confidence is contagious so build on any positive aspect of your game. Take those small successes like getting a steel, an assist, a rebound, a block or just good old fashioned hustle and get into the game, get your game back. Confidence is not passive nor for the faint of heart. It is bold and daring; it makes no excuses and takes no prisoners! Confidence is a state of mind, a state of being, not some unattainable chalis reserved only for those select few who reach the summit. It waits for every soul who dares to believe in himself or herself despite the odds or challenge. It waits to squelch the thirst of our doubts and fears if we will just drink the cool-aid. Yes confidence, like attitude, is a decision. We just have to trust and believe in our preparation, or abilities and ourselves. The motto is, "if you don't believe in me, who will." Believe, be confident, be great!

**All the Best for Training & Games – Ron Fox (Conditioning Coach TSA)**