



Sport • Psych news



Let It Go

Hi Wildcats,

In this issue of Sport Psych News, we discuss the ability to overcome failure. Let's face it – failing is a part of all sports. For example, one of the greatest hitters in baseball, Ted Williams, holds the record for the highest batting average in a single season at 0.406. This feat was accomplished in 1941. It is remarkable for a few reasons. First, the record has held for over 70 years. Second, no one has hit .400 since Ted Williams. The third reason is a little more obscure – batting .400 means Ted Williams FAILED 6 out of the 10 times he was at bat. How many professions can you think of where failing more times than succeeding is not only acceptable but considered legendary? Notice, I wrote the word acceptable NOT desirable. To be perfectly clear, the goal of this Sport Psych News is NOT to enjoy failing, far from it. Rather, the goal is to ACCEPT that failure is a part of life and sports. And, how you manage failure becomes a key ingredient to your success.

Hap Davis, a sport psychologist that has worked with the Canadian Olympic swim team and the Calgary Flames, has spent years researching how athletes handle pressure as well as failure. In his research, Dr. Davis studied how in moments of fear the human body produces cortisol, a chemical that helps activate the “fight-or-flight” mechanism. However,

Dr. Davis discovered that how cortisol may interfere with athletic performance. More specifically, Dr. Davis found that cortisol negatively affects testosterone, a chemical identified to be essential to athletic performance. Dr. Davis noticed that athletes who are able to “stay in the moment” continue to produce testosterone, which stimulates the parts of the brain wired for motor skills.

Similarly, Dr. Davis discovered that when athletes have a traumatic experience in a sport event, and then return to a similar moment, they often start producing cortisol. For example, if an athlete struggles at an important event such as a PAC-12 meet, the athlete may return the following year and find themselves panicking or having a negative emotional reaction to the event rather than focusing on their performance. Dr. Davis hypothesizes by remembering past failures in a negative way, an athlete releases cortisol which in turn means the athlete is going to perceive the event with more emotional content than is helpful to perform. By focusing on past failures, you tend to think about the reward or costs of the event. When this happens, you are activating the emotional parts of your brain which again is impairing the performance parts. Thus, if you are competing in scenario that triggers a memory of poor performance, you are at risk for activating the emotional

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ARIZONA



BEAR DOWN

part of the brain which may lead to another poor performance. This can be a painful cycle that some argue is the origin of “choking.”

Most athletes and coaches will try to fix this problem by saying “forget it. It’s no big deal” or “move on.” Though sound advice, it is easier to think you have “moved on” than emotionally feel like you have “moved on.” As a result, an athlete will think they are fine only to return to the stadium and have an emotional reaction that will induce the chemicals that once again increase the likelihood of failing. So, what is a better treatment? Research has provided us with two sound treatments. The first treatment focuses on your ability to retell the experience without reliving it. Specifically, you should revisit the failed experience with video (if possible) and storytelling repeatedly until it no longer triggers an emotional response. Additionally, you should break down the event, like a coach, and focus on how to correct the error you made. Ask yourself: “what is the key element missing that if corrected would lead to future success?” Thus, when you return to the event, you will be driven more by the desire

“I never looked at the consequences of missing a big shot... when you think about the consequences you always think of a negative result.”
~ Michael Jordan

to correct the mistake than the fear of reliving it. The second recommended treatment is meant to be used if you are at the event and feeling a sense of doubt or panic. The second treatment requires you to boost the chemicals that the cortisol is trying to shut down. As mentioned, cortisol inhibits testosterone. And, testosterone heightens your abilities. If you find yourself dreading the event (which will stimulate cortisol production), you should find a way to increase your testosterone such as riding a stationary bike for a few minutes as fast as you can. By activating your body, you will produce testosterone as well as stimulate your motor cortex. You will know it is working because your sense of fear will go away and you will begin to feel more confident and energized. To ensure the greatest chance of success, you should perform the first treatment (i.e., focusing on error correction from the past event) well in advance of the upcoming event. And, if you feel nervous during the event, then enact the second treatment (i.e., get your body moving to produce testosterone and stimulate the motor cortex).



If you would like to learn in greater depth about these techniques; if you would like to discuss other benefits of sport and clinical psychology; or if you are feeling overwhelmed, exhausted, stressed out, frustrated, worried, sad, or lacking confidence, please contact the medical assistant at **621-8805** or ask your athletic trainer to schedule an appointment. I look forward to working with you.

Best Wishes,
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for Student-Athletes*