

# Dealing with Pressure

As an athlete participates in sport at higher levels, our ability to understand the factors that cause pressure and our ability to deal with pressure becomes crucial to having success. We have all watched performances on television or been a part of a great performance. In order to appreciate these “clutch” performances, we must first understand what causes pressure and how do we learn to embrace the opportunity to handle pressure situations. Some athletes and coaches love these moments, however others dread those feelings of pressure. Pressure has always been an integral part of sports. Exciting competitions often have pivotal moments when the outcomes are decided. These pressure situations are such a common part of sporting experiences and yet many of our athletes are not taught how to deal with them.

## **So what is pressure?**

Pressure usually refers to the feelings an athlete has about performing in a sport situation. It is often experienced as a compelling or constraining influence on the mind, or an urgent demand that must be met. Pressure is a feeling that is created by ourselves, when we react to particular events or situations. Pressure isn't necessarily bad – it can enhance motivation, concentration and enjoyment. That feeling of stress that often accompanies a pressure situation can help keep you on your toes, ready to rise to the challenge.

## **Where does pressure come from?**

Pressure can come from a variety of internal and external sources. For example:

- Parental expectations to perform
- Athletes' expectations about the competition
- Other people's expectations – especially teammates, coaches, and other people such as friends, relatives, or partners.
- Press and Media expectations including social media
- Preparation for competition – how well the athlete feels and how ready they are on game day
- Crowd or audience by their reactions to performance
- Importance of the performance – National Championship or Gold Medal
- Athletes readiness to perform – physically and mentally ready and healthy
- Timing in the completion – last play or last inning etc.
- Other areas in life that compete for the athletes' attention – relationships
- Lack of self-confidence
- Implementing a new technique in completion
- Repeated errors

Learning to respond to pressure in a positive way can be the most important tool for your athletes. Pressure is an illusion! The most important concept in dealing with pressure is to start with a realization that there is no such thing as competition pressure, except what you make of it in your mind. Pressure isn't something that happens to us – it is something that is manufactured by our own thinking. Aside from the physical pressure exerted on one opponent by another on the field, pressure in the competitive context isn't real – it doesn't exist. It doesn't have a form, a color, and a smell. Pressure is simply how we perceive the situation we are in. Athletes need to learn this, because once they understand that pressure is something they create, and then they also understand that pressure is

therefore something they can control. By controlling their responses to pressure situations, athletes learn to take them in stride.

**Controlling responses to pressure:**

- Learn to practice at the same level you compete at.
- Focus on the process and not the end result
- Practice pressure situations in training, so they become normal and easy to handle
- Ensure you have good preparation leading up to the competition
- Learn to focus on the right thing at the right time to avoid distractions
- Never give in – maintain your commitment
- Slow things down – most athletes tend to rush under pressure – stop and Breathe!!!
- Practice positive self-talk
- Have a good error recovery strategy – deal with them without affecting your confidence
- Strive for excellence – not perfection
- Identify the actions/skills that suffer most when you are in a pressure situation and practice those until they become automatic
- Increased fitness helps deal with pressure
- Remember – it is not about your feelings; it's about your actions. Take the focus off your feelings and focus on what you want to do!