

# DEALING WITH PRECOMPETITIVE ANXIETY

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*This article first appeared in the introductory issue of Sport Psychology Training Bulletin (P.O. Box 52234, Durham, NC 27717. 919/361-4621). The editors, Dr. Charles Hardy and Kelly Crace, deal with the "jitters" common to all athletes and offer suggestions on how to deal with them. The first recommendation for coaches is telling and too often overlooked.*

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## WHAT IS PRECOMPETITIVE ANXIETY?

Imagine that it is the night before a competition and you begin to worry about how well you will perform. You may find that your worrying begins to feed on itself, creating further areas of concern that you have not considered earlier. Your expectations about bleak. This is an example of *precompetitive anxiety (PCA)*, one of the most debilitating variables in sport performance.

Precompetitive anxiety is a state of arousal that is unpleasant or negative and occurs during the 24 hour span prior to competition. The worry that is associated with PCA is not just experienced with our heads, but with our entire body. Our bodies provide us with numerous cues such as muscle tension, butterflies, desire to urinate and cotton mouth that suggests that we are out of control. Our thoughts become self-focused, self-defeating and negative. Most of us will have a combination of these responses during the precompetitive period. However, the degree to which they influence our performance is largely dependent upon the interaction of our own uniqueness and the competitive situation.

## WHAT ARE THE SOURCES OF PCA?

Precompetitive anxiety results from an imbalance between perceived capabilities and the demands of the sport environment. When the perceived demands are balanced by the perceived capabilities you experience optimal arousal, often referred to as the *flow state*. In this state, everything appears to go smoothly, almost effortlessly. However, if your perceived capabilities exceed the sport challenge, arousal will decrease, resulting in boredom or lack of motivation. If the opposite occurs (perceived challenges exceed capabilities), you will become overaroused, resulting in worry and anxiety. As you can see, then, PCA results when skills and abilities are not perceived as equivalent to the

sport challenge.

Research by Walter Kroll has demonstrated that at least five factors underlie PCA: 1. *physical complaints*—digestive disturbances, shaking and yawning; 2. *fear of failure*—losing, choking, living up to expectations, and making mistakes; 3. *feelings of inadequacy*—unprepared, poor conditioning, low skill/ability, and feelings that something is wrong; 4. *loss of control*—being jinxed, bad luck, poor officiating, and inclement weather; and 5. *guilt*—concerns about hurting an opponent, playing dirty, and cheating. Whether or not you experience PCA is dependent upon several factors, such as skill level, experience, and your general level of arousal in daily activities.

## HOW CAN PCA AFFECT PERFORMANCE?

There are two primary ways that PCA can affect your performance. *First, a high state of physical arousal may be counterproductive to your particular sport activity.* For sports requiring endurance, power, or both, PCA can be very draining on an athlete's energy level. In sports where calmness is critical (e.g., golf, archery, free-throw shooting), PCA can significantly interfere with your ability to stay calm. A high state of physical arousal can also interfere with sports requiring a focused channeling of power. Effective performances in these sports require some muscles to be tense and others to be relaxed. Ineffectively transfer their power. The increased tension usually interferes with this channeling. Examples of such sports include hitting in baseball, karate, and field events such as javelin, discus, and shot put.

*Second, research has demonstrated that anxiety can significantly interfere with your ability to think clearly.* When you are anxious, your thoughts generally turn inward to focus on yourself, which may result in an inappropriate focusing of attention. Actions that were once automatic require constant thought, which further interferes with your ability to adjust to make

quick, on-the-spot decisions. In addition, these thoughts may be negative and result in preoccupation with what you can't do, rather than what you can do.

### DOES NERVOUSNESS ALWAYS LEAD TO BAD PERFORMANCES?

Definitely not. Whenever you anticipate an event that is important to you, it is normal to feel some nervousness. In fact, it is a sign of readiness. This type of readiness is known as *positive arousal* and is usually referring to many of the physical cues you experience. Elite athletes channel this energy to work for them rather than against them. Answers to the following questions may help you distinguish between positive arousal and negative anxiety:

1. *How much does my sport require me to be 'pumped' as I enter the competition?* Some sports may require a higher state of arousal (e.g., weight lifting) than others (e.g., golf).
2. *Do I often have thoughts of self-doubt about my ability?*
3. *Do I often have thoughts about factors that are beyond my control?*

Answering "Yes" to the last two questions is an indication that you are moving from positive arousal to negative anxiety. If you find yourself nervous but still confident in your ability, that is a sign of readiness. However, worrying about your ability to perform at levels that you normally are able to perform with ease, or worrying about factors over which you have no control may interfere with your ability to enter a competition mentally ready.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ATHLETES

**1. Become more aware of your optimal level at arousal.** Think of the times when you felt ready going into a competition and it worked for you. Think of other times when you were anxious and it interfered with your performance. Being as specific as possible, write down the differences between these times based on three questions (a) What *thoughts* made you feel ready, and what thoughts made you anxious?; (b) What *feelings* did you experience when you were ready versus when you were anxious?; and (c) What were the differences in your *behavior* between these times?

This will allow you to start looking for patterns that may help you become more aware of what best prepares you mentally for a competition. Examples of when you were anxious may include thinking about whether you had prepared enough for the competition, exaggerating the skill of your opponent(s), or exaggerating the importance of the outcome of the competition. Feelings may have been an overly high sense of

arousal that led you to emotionally "avoid" the competition rather than "move toward" the competition. You may have found that, behaviorally, you were more anxious when you were around others rather than by yourself. The important point is to start understanding the factors that allow you to become motivated for a competition, and the factors that tend to take you too far. A good rule of thumb is to notice when you begin to focus intently on the competition and become excited about approaching the competition. This is a good indication that you are reaching your optimal level. If self doubt occurs and you are having trouble putting it aside, you have most likely crossed into the "anxiety zone." The following recommendations may help during those times.

### 2. Focus on things that are within your control.

One of the major sources of anxiety is worrying about factors that are beyond your control. Your thoughts become preoccupied with a series of "what ifs." A great method of counterbalancing this attitude is to become more *performance-oriented*. Being performance-oriented means that you are concerned with the thing that is most in your control—your performance. Performance-oriented athletes are more satisfied with a loss if they played their best, than if they had won and played poorly. Conversely, being outcome-oriented means that you are concerned with one thing—the win. It doesn't matter how you get there, as long as you have the big "W." We are certainly not trying to suggest that winning is not important. Of course it is; we all enjoy the thrill of winning. However, by placing the highest importance on the outcome, think of the added pressure you have placed upon yourself. We should hasten to add that it is unnecessary pressure. So many other factors beyond your control play into whether or not you win (e.g., the opponent's ability, where you are playing, coaching, weather). Most of our anxiety lies in the fear of the unknown. We can reduce this fear by pulling in the reins to focus on what is truly within our control. When you think about it, being more performance-oriented is likely to increase your chances of winning. You will be approaching the competition focused on what you can do and what needs to be done to perform your best.

In addition, as you begin concentrating on your performance in the precompetitive period it is usually best to concentrate on your strengths. *Focus on what you can do, not what you can't do.* Practice is where you work on your weaknesses. The competition is the time to capitalize on your strengths and on your improved areas. Therefore, focus intently on these areas. If you feel your arousal level getting too high, take a moment to regroup and say to yourself "OK, I'm going to show them what I can do, and not worry about what I can't do. I'm going to give 100% of the potential I

have today." The bottom line is to learn to focus on doing the best you can with what you have at that moment, and *view any positive outcome as a bonus*. If you do well, take the time to focus on how that makes you feel. If you win, it makes your performance that much sweeter.

**3. Use "performance cues" to develop or re-train your arousal level.** It is important to realize that with mental training you are developing skills in much the same way you develop physical skills. You can recall when you first started learning a new level of your sport, how you had to think about every little movement. Eventually, as you practiced these new skills they became more habitual. It is the same way with mental skills. Your typical arousal level has been developed over time and may have become habitual. To retrain your arousal level, you simply have to learn new mental routines and practice them until they become automatic. In sport, however, athletes may need to do this quickly, rather than constantly rehearse long statements to themselves.

One helpful exercise is to reflect on how you want to play given your present skill level. Your desired performance maybe are collection of past accomplishment or an image of a future performance. *Once you have a clear image of a desired performance, label that performance with a representative cue word, statement, or symbol*. When doing this, you may choose to use a general cue that reflects your overall performance, or a cue that reflects a more specific part of your performance. In addition, you may want to incorporate a cue that reminds you of a time when you competed at your desired level. Experiment with all three types of cues, separately or in combination, to determine which works best for you. The most important thing to remember is that this label must immediately recall the image of a performance that you want to create. An example is a rower who used the cue "cougar" to represent explosive speed as a way of preparing for a sprint race, and "swan" to represent long, smooth rowing strokes as a way of preparing for a middle distance race.

The next step is *incorporating this performance cue into your pre-game preparation*. Reflect on your cue as a method of motivation. You can also use it to reduce your arousal level if you start experiencing anxiety. If you start feeling anxious, take a deep breath, relax, and repeat the cue to yourself. Try to focus fully on what it represents to you. This will result in bringing you back to performance-oriented thoughts that will properly prepare you for the competition. With practice and repetition, these thoughts will become more habitual and capable of controlling your arousal level.

The same principle is utilized often with music

tapes. Many athletes have a favorite song that has the effect of psyching them up, and another song that relaxes them. During the precompetitive period, they will listen to one or both of the songs at times when they want to modify their arousal levels. They have essentially found a perform once cue that induces a feeling that they are trying to achieve. The important thing is to find what's right for you. It may take some trial-and-error, but will eventually result in approaching a competition in a manner that will allow you to enjoy your sport at its optimal level.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COACHES

**1. Became aware at your own arousal levels and how they interact with the athlete and other coaches.** It is important to spend time reflecting on your own arousal levels as a way of understanding how they impact your effectiveness in coaching and your impact on other's performances. Applying the suggestions in *Recommendations for Athletes* to your coaching performance can help you understand and develop your optimal arousal level, as well as deal with PCA.

**2. Understand your athletes, individually, as to how they react during the precompetitive period.** Recognize those athletes who are usually under aroused and those who are usually overaroused for the demands of your sport. The under aroused athletes maybe those who typically take awhile to find their groove and appear sluggish during the early parts of the competition. The overaroused athletes, on the other hand, can be detected most often by being strong "practice-players." These are the athletes who do great in practice but have trouble realizing their potential in competition. Performances during competition are a regression for them rather than a progression.

**3. Allow time for athletes to individually prepare themselves mentally for the competition.** Research has demonstrated that the famous "win one for the flipper" pep-talks are relatively short-lived in their effectiveness. During pregame preparation, it may be helpful to bring the team together to review and discuss strategy. Following this meeting, individuals should be allowed some time on their own to prepare for the game in a way that is most effective for them. Do not underestimate the power of this gesture. Many athletes are very concerned about how they present themselves to their coach. If they have tapped into how you would like your athletes to prepare, they will most likely present that image to you. However, this maybe totally opposite of what they need. Conveying the message that you respect their methods of preparation frees them up to devote time to it. Some athletes may want to be by themselves, some may want to talk with others to discuss the game, others may want to be with

teammates for humorous small-talk as a way of reducing their anxiety. Allow them to go through the trial-and-error of finding out what is best for them. Following this individual time, bring them back together and summarize the team goals you hope to accomplish. In addition, incorporating individual time for the coaches is equally important for their preparation.

**4. Foster a performance-oriented attitude in your athletes.** As was explained in *Recommendations for Athletes*, athletes need to focus on what they can control. So many factors beyond their control play a part as to whether they win. Placing a high priority on outcome results in unnecessary pressure and extra factors that athletes worry about. Unfortunately, a coach's livelihood is dependent upon outcome. Job stability and opportunity for professional advancement usually hinges on the win-loss record. As stated before, we are not implying that winning is unimportant. We are stating, however, that placing winning as the top priority can have negative effects on an athlete's mental preparation and subsequent performance. Remember, your greatest chance for a positive outcome is to have each athlete play at his/her potential. This can best be achieved by having your athletes focus on what they can control—their performance. Teaching athletes to appreciate the importance of gauging success by how well they perform according to their own potential rather than by other's standards is one of the greatest lessons a coach can teach.

**5. Be specific with your suggestions to help athletes with PCA.** It is easy to create a situation where an athlete struggling with PCA starts to "worry about worrying." *Be careful to keep helpful suggestions specific to the actions that the athlete finds troublesome, rather than identifying or characterizing the athlete by the weakness he/she demonstrates.* If the athlete begins to view him/herself as a "choker," he/she creates a self-fulfilling prophecy that will ensure further PCA. A coach can be extremely helpful in showing the athlete that it is only one part of his/her game and can be viewed as a challenge for improvement rather than a permanent birthmark.

**6. As your time allows, try to schedule periodic individual meetings that focus on the issue of mental training.** Once again, don't underestimate the power of this gesture. You are letting them know that you view their mental training as important and you are there to help them in that regard. Most importantly, it breaks down the barrier that athletes may feel to always present themselves as mentally tough 100% of the time. Such meetings may remove concern athletes may have about being an imposter around you, constantly fearing what will happen "if coach finds out what I am really like." Let them know that dedicating time to their weaknesses as well as strengths will not

jeopardize their position but contribute to their potential as an athlete.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PARENTS

**1. Become aware of your own arousal levels and how they interact with your child.** How many of us have experienced the extreme tension and anxiety associated with watching our child participate in sports? It is important to spend time reflecting on your own arousal levels as a way of understanding how they impact your child's enjoyment and performance in sports. Applying the suggestions in *Recommendations for Athletes* can help you deal with any anxiety you may experience.

**2. Foster a performance-oriented attitude in your young athlete.** As parents, one of the easiest questions for us to ask our children after a competition is "Did you win?" Unfortunately, this question tends to foster an outcome-oriented attitude in children. Children pick up very quickly what are important measures of success. It is a parent's responsibility to gently guide them into measuring success by their ability to do the best that they can. Helping them focus on what they can control will be a major factor in reducing PCA for athletes as they grow and develop. This can be facilitated by asking them questions that encourage them to reflect on their performance, rather than the outcome. Refer to the other previous sections for further information about performance-versus outcome-orientations.

**3. Look for clues as to what their motivation is for participating in sport and its possible effect on PCA.** Research has indicated that the vast majority of youth sports participants engage in athletics for fun being around their friends, and using their friends as a guide to comparing their own abilities. Winning actually is a low priority for youth as they first begin to participate in athletics. Does this profile fit your child? If not, look for the influences that may be directing your child. While you may not be able to change other's influences, you can certainly counterbalance them by bringing fun back into the purpose of athletics and focusing on their performance (see #1).

If your child is becoming unusually nervous before a competition, it may be a sign that he or she is participating for reasons other than his/her own. We have worked with a number of children who have become acutely aware that they receive the most attention from their parents when they are participating in sports. Their number one reason for participating in sports is to seek approval from their parents. Before a competition, these children become very anxious because they are in conflict: "I don't really want to do this, but I want my parents to be proud of me." If this is characteristic of your child, reinforce the notion that your love for him/her

is independent of his/her participation in sport.

As a parent, ask yourself two tough questions:

1. Am I trying to relive my youth through my kids?
2. Am I using sport as a "toughening" process for my kids? One of the greatest gifts we can give our children is to support them as they discover, through trial-and-error, where their talents and interests lie. To reach their potential in any activity requires dedication and commitment. Realizing that factor alone is the only kind of "toughening" they need. You may find that your children will discover a new interest in sport that

is based on their own motivation.

**4. Assist your child in distinguishing times when things clicked for him/her versus times when PCA significantly interfered with his/her performance.**

Young athletes may have trouble finding clues as to why they are experiencing PCA. Parents can help by guiding them through the process of becoming more aware of their arousal levels and where their optimal level is. Guiding them through the questions suggested in #1 of *Recommendations for Athletes* may be helpful.