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What Happens Under Pressure

Two books investigate the not-so-fine art of choking.

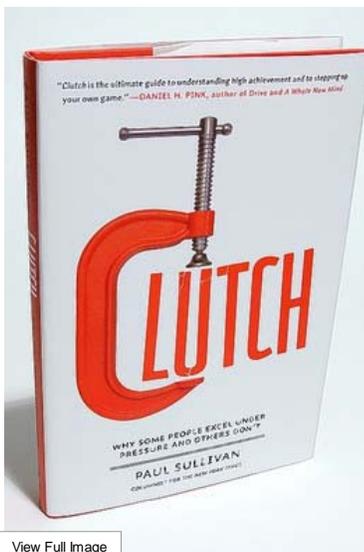
By PHILIP DELVES BROUGHTON

It is a situation we have all witnessed or experienced firsthand. The make-or-break moment arrives. The decisive at-bat, the well-rehearsed concert performance, the public speech. Then suddenly—aaarggh. It all goes wrong. The ball whistles past, the fingers slide all over the keyboard, the voice becomes an inarticulate mumble. You are now a choker. You have failed in the clutch.

It is an unfortunate truth that years of patient success can so easily be undone. Ask Greg Norman, the Australian-born golfer who collapsed so spectacularly in the 1996 Masters tournament, blowing a comfortable lead on his final round and losing by five strokes. Or Alex Rodriguez, the New York Yankees slugger whose epic regular-season statistics were for years undermined by his reputation as a serial big-game choker.

Paul Sullivan, a journalist, and Sian Beilock, a psychology professor, have taken different approaches to the same subject: What is it that allows some people to succeed under pressure and forces others to fail? Whereas Mr. Sullivan has sallied forth with notepad and pen in hand to tell individual stories, Ms. Beilock draws heavily on the academic research. Both authors have produced readable explanations for why we choke and valuable suggestions for what we can do to get through a make-or-break moment with a better chance of success.

Mr. Sullivan takes his examples from sports, business, the military and the stage. He explains right away that there are five traits that help people pull off a clutch performance: focus; discipline, adaptability, presence (i.e., actual involvement in the task at hand), and fear and desire. At one point he contrasts the performances of Jamie Dimon, chief executive of JPMorgan Chase, and Kenneth Lewis, the former head of Bank of America, during the financial crisis of 2008. Both men went into the crisis with their firms in good health. By the end of it, Mr. Dimon had acquired Bear Stearns and Washington Mutual and handsomely increased his company's share price. Mr. Lewis had acquired the teetering Merrill Lynch and seen Bank of America lose \$90 billion in shareholder value.



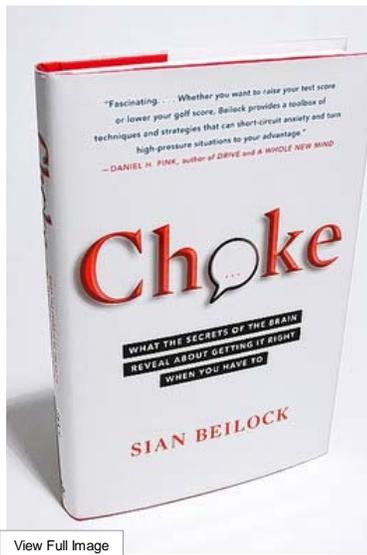
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Why the difference? Mr. Lewis made the errors typical of chokers. He over-thought the situation, and he was over-confident. When the Merrill deal was criticized, he tried to avoid the blame. He acted, according to Mr. Sullivan, as an "imperial chief executive," refusing to believe that the worst might happen. Mr. Dimon, by contrast, immersed himself in every detail of his acquisitions, fought to get prices that made hard financial sense and never shirked from the consequences. It was as if all his experience as a financier and manager had found its perfect expression in that moment.

Ms. Beilock's examples run the gamut from golf and chess to education and music. She writes that the later golfers learn the sport, the more vulnerable they are to choking under pressure. The reason? The later you learn, she says, the more dependent you are on your working memory. Or rather, you over-think the game. The younger you learn, the more you develop your skills using sensory and motor-brain areas. Thus when you are bent over that game-winning putt, you just play your stroke and don't worry the ball away from the cup.

Clutch

By Paul Sullivan
(Portfolio, 246 pages, \$25.95)



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Choke

By Sian Beilock
(Free Press, 294 pages, \$26)

Similarly, in math tests, Ms. Beilock has found, people best suited to problem-solving, reasoning and comprehension are the most likely to fail under the pressure of a timed exam. Part of the reason is that they are not inclined to take short-cuts to answers. They are also prone to putting far too much meaning into situations they deem important. Their reasoning quickly becomes worrying, which in turn takes over their brain, leaving little room for much else.

Both Mr. Sullivan and Ms. Beilock insist on the importance of facing the truth about one's abilities and yet not paralyzing oneself through analysis. In some cases, choking is just a question of not being good enough. Here what is needed is more practice and discipline. But one has to forgo one's pride to admit as much.

In other cases, individuals can start to worry too much about the effects of an important moment rather than focusing on what needs to be done in the present. Alex Rodriguez's troubles, Mr. Sullivan writes, came down largely to his excessive fear of criticism and his constant mental comparisons of himself with the greatest legends of baseball. It was only in 2009, after his marriage had dissolved and he had spent months recovering from an ailing hip, that he discovered the humility needed to be a clutch player. As Mr. Rodriguez put it: "For me, with no expectations and trusting my teammates and taking the walks and doing the little things, you end up doing big things."

For people in the world of business, Ms. Beilock's recommendations include careful and repeated practice; writing down your worries to make them explicit and to stop them distracting you under stress; and not worrying about what you cannot control. In sports, she recommends distracting yourself so that you don't over-think your mechanics; keeping a steady rhythm; and changing your technique every so often to stay fresh. But perhaps most important of all—for sports and a good deal else in life—there is value in putting yourself in stress situations so that you learn how to handle them better. The more we perform in the clutch, the less likely we are to choke.

Mr. Delves Broughton is the author of "Ahead of the Curve: Two Years at Harvard Business School."

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