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## Research suggests cliches might be best elite athletes can do after game

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Having just spent a week among pro football players, I can tell you with near certainty that “it is what it is.”

I also can tell you the Giants and Patriots pledged to “stay within ourselves” in Super Bowl XLVI. The importance of “making plays on both sides of the ball” couldn’t have been stressed more during their “business trip” to Indianapolis.

Giants players told me quarterback Eli Manning is “a warrior” and defensive end Jason Pierre-Paul is “a freak of nature.” Were they sure of this? “No question about it,” they said.

By the way, Gisele Bundchen, the wife of Patriots quarterback Tom Brady, threw the team’s receivers “under the bus.”

Go ahead and roll your eyes at the clichés. I do all the time. But recent research suggests elite athletes’ single-mindedness might explain their use of tired phrases, especially right after games.

When athletes are performing well, they tend to block out everything, including how and why they’re succeeding, according to Sian Beilock, a psychology professor at the University of Chicago. The reason so many athletes thank God or their moms after games is they have trouble recalling what just happened, she said.

They’re so zeroed in, they forget to mention the people who made it all possible: their agents.

“I have research showing that highly skilled golfers have really bad memories for what they’ve just done, compared with people who are less skilled,” said Beilock, the author of the book *Choke: What the Secrets of the Brain Reveal About Getting It Right When You Have To*. “The idea is that when you’re performing at a really high level, you’re not attending to every step of what you’re doing. It’s running more on autopilot outside of conscious awareness.

“To be able to recall something and talk about it, you have to have been paying attention at the time when it happened. What we think is going on in these elite athletes is that, in the moment and especially when they’re performing at a high level, they’re not focusing on how their skill is unfolding. They might be focusing on the outcome. They might be focusing on one key thing they need to achieve.”

It's why Giants linebacker Michael Boley wouldn't have been mistaken for Winston Churchill when he talked about how his team was able to overcome the Patriots on Sunday.

“We play with a lot of poise, and we were able to stay focused and bounce back,” he said.

Added safety Kenny Phillips: “Our backs have been against the wall [before].”

What I'm taking away from Beilock's theory is that some of these athletes aren't responsible for the thin porridge they're ladling out for public consumption. If so, it changes everything. When an athlete tells me after a game, “We overcame so much adversity to get here,” the thought bubble above my head no longer will read, “How is a flat tire on the Ferrari overcoming adversity?”

No, I'll be thinking, “Clearly, this is a man who was so focused on destroying the opposition that he's incapable of an original thought.” Does it mean I'll use the offending cliché in my column?

No, it does not.

The dumb jock is out, replaced by the obsessed jock who doesn't want his mind cluttered with unproductive thoughts.

“One of the big reasons we see poor performance, especially in stressful situations, is the idea called ‘paralysis by analysis,’ ” Beilock said. “When people want to ensure an optimal outcome, one way they do that is they try and control every aspect of what they're doing. They start analyzing, and, in a way, that breaks down once-fluid movements. It opens up opportunity for error.

“I think there is a tendency to not want to go back and start overanalyzing aspects of performances that were executed flawlessly.”

In other words, it's easier to say things to the media that don't require much depth of thought. It's a way for athletes to protect themselves.

“When you get highly skilled golfers to start thinking and describing what they're doing for other people, they screw up,” Beilock said.

Fine, but what about the poor sportswriters? Has anybody considered the effects of clichés on our brains? Listening to athletes might be the unhealthiest thing since secondhand smoke.

“You're probably frustrated when you can't get anything you can use from these athletes,” Beilock said.

Numb is more like it.

But you learn to take it one game at a time.

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