Lost in Thought

Relax your mental muscle to avoid choking when it counts.

By Wei-Hsuan Lin

In the pantheon of high-pressure moments, one stands out. It was Game One of the 1988 World Series and Kirk Gibson stood at the plate with an injured knee and a stomach virus. Down by a run in the bottom of the ninth, with two outs and a full count, he swung. CBS broadcaster Jack Buck called it: "It's gonna be a home run! Unbelievable! The Dodgers win 5-4!" Gibson thrived under pressure where some athletes would have choked, and scientists are beginning to understand how mere mortals can attain nerves of steel.

We all know the symptoms of anxiety: intrusive thoughts of failure, accompanied by physical symptoms such as upset stomach and sometimes heavy arms and legs. Two theories explain why anxiety leads to failure. The "distraction" model proposes that anxiety diverts people's attention from their performance; the "self-focus" model proposes that pressure makes people pay too much attention to the mechanics of movement instead of overall flow.

For actions people have rehearsed a thousand times, like a pro putting a golf ball, recent work from Australian researchers Daniel Gucciardi and James Dimmock bears out the self-focus model: Taking your mind off the details actually paves the way for success. According to Art Markman, a psychologist at the University of Texas at Austin, "The last thing you want to be doing is thinking about where your elbow is. Instead, you should think, 'With this pitch, I am going to hit it to the opposite field.' Your body knows what to do; your job is to stay out of its way.

Sian Beilock, a psychologist at the University of Chicago, suggests a way to avoid anxiety in the first place: "Don't just practice; practice under pressure," by, say, placing bets with your friends. And make your practice situation as realistic as possible so nothing new throws you off when success is on the line.

Tony Esposito, a retired hockey goaltender, once said, "There is pressure every time you are in there. That's the name of the game—pressure." So prepare hard, then let success unfold.

Wei-Hsuan Lin is an intern at PT.

No Worries

Pressure is inevitable, but choking is not.

Practice under pressure: Play matches with friends, but with consequences (e.g., the loser has to buy dinner).

Keep it real: Train in conditions that match the event. Wear a real jersey or find an audience.

See the big picture: Focus on global cue words, like smooth, tempo, and rhythm instead of details that might make you self-focus, like "Keep your head over the ball."