

The best athletes believe that stress is a good thing—and they embrace 'winning ugly,' says performance psychologist

July 15 2024, by Paul Mansell



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The summer of sport is well underway. Already we have seen [penalty](#)

[shootout drama](#) at the Euros, defending champion [Marketa Vondrousova](#) [exiting Wimbledon](#) at the first hurdle and preparations getting underway for the Paris Olympic Games.

Regardless of the sport, at elite level, the stakes are high and the athletes are required to perform under considerable pressure. The sources of pressure may be internal, such as the expectations they place on themselves. They may emanate from within their camp, for example not wanting to let their coach or teammates down. Or they may come from the crowds watching both in the stadium and on TV.

In the case of the Olympics, athletes will have spent the last four years training to produce their best performance on one given day—or even in a ten second race. Physically, tactically and technically, there is little to separate them, but as former England cricketer Stuart Broad has said, psychology plays a huge part in performance. He called the sport "[90% mental.](#)"

So how might athletes use psychology to aid their performance when the heat is on? As a performance psychologist, I believe mindset should be at the heart of their psychological approach. [During a recent address to graduates at Dartmouth College](#) eight-time Wimbledon champion Roger Federer shared that despite winning 80% of the matches played during his career, he only won 54% of the points in those matches.

He commented: "Negative energy is wasted energy. You want to become a master at overcoming hard moments. That to me is the sign of a champion."

The term "mindset" was pioneered by the psychologist [Professor Carol Dweck](#). A mindset is like a lens for how we view something. Often mindset is spoken of in general terms, but it is possible to have a mindset about specific domains, such as stress.

Consciously or subconsciously, everyone has a mindset about stress and in sport, athletes' beliefs about hard or challenging moments matter. They can choose to believe that stress can be enhancing for their performance, health and growth, or they can consider stress to be [debilitating](#).

[My research](#) shows that an athlete's "stress mindset" plays an important role in helping to manage their mental well-being amid the high demands of competitive sport.

Athletes who see stress as beneficial are likely to interpret moments like a knockout match in the European Championships as a challenge rather than as a threat. They are also more likely to experience [better mental health](#). Taken together, this may contribute towards allowing them to thrive in demanding circumstances.

Alongside my Staffordshire University colleagues, I host the podcast [Performing Under Pressure](#). To find out more about how athletes view stressful situations, we have quizzed a range of international athletes about how they deal with the demands of performing well against the backdrop of high expectations—and we often hear a similar message.

Former England youth footballers Ellie Wilson and Ella Tagliavini both used the phrase "pressure is a privilege" on the show. In our view, this mindset towards challenging situations has been one of the ingredients in their careers as [elite athletes](#). Now at Wolves Women and Fulham Women respectively, both players exhibit a "stress-is-enhancing" mindset when required to perform under pressure. This set of beliefs can start a domino effect, with positive consequences for well-being and performance.

When an athlete thinks in this way, they will probably choose to face high stress situations rather than avoid them, take responsibility for

situations on the pitch and back themselves to perform well. They might not enjoy stressful situations—[Emma Raducanu](#) described a recent win at Wimbledon as "ugly" and as a "fight"—but they welcome stress because they know that it can bring the best out of them when it matters.

In the case of "winning ugly," this implies a win that is built on the foundations of grit and determination, rather than being a free flowing poetic performance. Stress mindset can play an important role here. When athletes know that in order to win, they will have to fight hard, they will utilize stress and its associated responses to fully engage in the battle.

The good news is that although beliefs about stress may be deeply held, my research shows that it is possible to alter the way in which athletes think about stress. At Staffordshire, we developed the cognitive behavioral intervention [Mindset: Performing Under Pressure](#) that seeks to enhance well-being and performance.

When compared to a [control group](#), results demonstrated that stress mindset significantly improved because of the intervention, and this was accompanied by reductions in negative emotions. We helped the athletes to recognize that many stress responses are helpful for performance, such as the release of adrenaline, and that character may be built from coping with previous [stressful situations](#).

Admittedly, when stress is chronic, this is often unhelpful for well-being and performance, and it was important for us to provide this message for the athletes to buy into our approach. However, by helping athletes to think about stress in a balanced and flexible way, they will likely experience better performance and well-being. As the Olympians put their finishing touches to their preparation, the research is clear—mindset matters, and this includes their [mindset](#) towards stress.

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