

Athlete's 'rituals' important for overcoming performance anxiety

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Dry mouth, sweaty palms and rapid heart rate are just a few symptoms of increased anxiety, the kind an athlete might feel before the big game. Those symptoms drop off quickly, but psychological factors hang around to influence the outcome of an athlete's performance. That is where intervention, often in the form of rituals or performance routines, comes in, according to Richard Cox, a sports psychology researcher at the University of Missouri-Columbia.

"Negative thoughts will kill you," Cox said. "An athlete's routine is critical. The body is a marvelous piece of machinery, but you can interfere with it. If you see the basketball player at the free throw line, you will often notice a certain routine being repeated. That is when negative thoughts are being replaced by positive thoughts, relaxation occurs and mistakes are minimized."

According to Cox, who just published the sixth edition of his book "Sport Psychology: Concepts and Applications," an athletic performance task can be repeated hundreds of times yet mistakes are still made. Well planned and practiced performance routines can minimize these errors. Dallas Cowboys football player Tony Romo certainly knows about this concept. He was supposed to hold the ball for the kicker, after the snap, for a game-winning field goal in a recent playoff game, an action he has performed hundreds of times without fault. However, he fumbled, and his team lost the game.

"Even during the Superbowl, where you have the best of the best, some will still make terrible errors. Even the most highly accomplished athletes will have brief lapses and fail to control anxiety or fear," said Cox, professor and chair of the MU College of Education Department of Education, School and Counseling Psychology. "If you have confidence in the team around you, that should help. However, kickers are the only ones who can kick the ball, and placeholders are the only ones

who can hold the ball. They still must control the mind, go through the pre-performance routine and replace negative thoughts with positive ones."

Cox said that seasoned athletes will be less affected by anxiety because their skill levels are so high. However, rookies are more likely to be affected by anxiety because their skills are less honed, and more situations are new and unfamiliar to them.

"Sometimes this is the reason why accomplished athletes are considered cocky," Cox said. "They need to be; they cannot be thinking negative thoughts."

The previous edition of Cox's book on sports psychology was translated into four different languages. The new edition was released this month.

Source: University of Missouri-Columbia

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