

**On the Firing Line** (Fifty-eighth in a series)

## **Physical – Technical – Mental – Emotional – Part 4**

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**“Heroes and cowards feel the same fear;  
Heroes just act differently.”**

The so-called “mental game” includes many facets, such as goal setting, mental rehearsal, mental activation level (called arousal level in the literature), self-talk, and attention control, among many others. Combining the physical, technical, and mental aspects of performance is very important. There is a fourth major aspect required to complete the puzzle: the emotional components of performing with excellence while under pressure.

Don't worry, guys, we are not going to ask you to get in touch with your “feminine side” or anything of the sort. Have you ever been angry? That is but one example of a universal emotion (or emotional block). Learning and utilizing the emotional aspects of performance provide many of the “missing pieces” in our quest for excellence in competition.

### **Emotional**

Why do athletes and coaches do what they do? Why do they invest all the long, lonely hours of toil? They do this because they are motivated to achieving a goal that is important to them. Motivation can come only from within the individual. Their desire drives them. Coaches, parents, and fellow athletes cannot motivate a person; they can only hope to inspire the athlete.

Athletes must “keep in touch” with themselves, their desires, and their priorities. If a goal is important, work for it. If you are unwilling to do the work, is the goal real, or merely a dream or wish? Be honest with yourself. Be honest with others. Set goals that mean something to you. Then, the goal will pull you willingly toward success, instead of seeming to be an obstacle or unachievable.

When we desire something, when we feel motivated to work for something, when we are happy and confident, there is a strong flow of positive emotional energy. It fuels our passion and work. It brings us warm feelings of love, comfort, and confidence. When we have put in the time and effort and have a strong flow of positive emotional energy, we are “on top of the world” and can achieve the seemingly impossible.

There are blocks to this positive flow, and they are fatal to high performance. Champions learn how to become aware of and resolve these blocks in order to reach their goals.

Anger is a block that takes place when reality does not meet our expectations. We want that perfect shot, and too often become angry when our shot does not result in a clean bust or a deep ten. Our reaction then ensures the next shot is no better, and often worse. Then we really get angry! Self-destruction and a meltdown is the typical result. Become aware of your emotions and of their profound effect on your performance, which in turn affects the outcomes.

Fear of failure or embarrassment is another emotional block. We become unable to think, move, or even breathe. We also become inflexible and unable to adapt to the demands of the moment. Our focus is everywhere it shouldn't be instead of observing and just doing in the Present Moment. Face your fears, identify them as nothing more than obstacles and fantasies that

we construct within our own minds, and then turn your focus away onto positive topics. You must look toward forward progress, rather than look over your shoulder at what you fear.

While it is important to acknowledge the presence of fear, anger, doubt, and other emotional blocks, it is even more important that we not fixate on those aspects. Too often, we get stuck with our focus on the fear. Instead, move forward despite those negative feelings. We can learn to do this. Become aware of what is happening (focus on fear or other negative aspect) and then make a decision to refocus on what is happening right now. Breathe, relax, and refocus on what is important.

Notice the dynamic. Rather than let our emotions control us and dictate our performance, we can, just as with the physical and technical aspects of performance, learn to become aware of and positively change the mental and emotional aspects of our performance.

Rather than fall victim to the “two nines crisis” by allowing it to overtake our focus and emotions, we can let go of the result, learn from the performance, refocus, and move on to “This Shot Now” as our mindset.

Years ago, for three years, I had the privilege of working intensively with an exceptionally motivated and hardworking athlete. Taking nothing away from any other athlete, this athlete practically redefined the definition of commitment and hard work. As she started to advance into the elite ranks, at the age of 17, I asked her “What is the difference between a day when you shoot 390, with no hope of making the final, and a 398?” Her answer was immediate: “The confidence I bring to the line.” When she was confident, she was free to allow herself to “just shoot” the way she knew would move her forward. When she was not confident, that became her focus and she could not excel.

The champion, delivering the last shot in the final, is not calm. However, he or she has trained for that moment and learned to thrive in the face of the pressure. Peace and capability do not come when all is calm and quiet. Rather, they come to the athlete who has prepared for the storm, and learned to have an appropriate level of mental and emotional activation in the midst of the maelstrom. Think of it as being in the eye of a hurricane. There is nothing except you, your equipment, your training, your mental and emotional skills; nothing else.

We have touched on only a few of the countless aspects of the emotional dimensions of performance in this article. The books “Body Mind Mastery”, “Extraordinary Golf”, and “Sport Psychology and Competition – The Psyche of the Shot” listed on the Resources page of my blog are excellent references. Pages 139-164 in Psyche of the Shot are an especially valuable resource in the area of emotion in sport performance. The entire book is one of the best psychological resources within our sport, comprehensively covering all facets of applied sports psychology in an accessible and practical manner.

It is clearly important to be physically fit, to have excellent equipment that is properly adjusted, and to train properly and frequently. That gets you in the pack. To break out, explore and train the mental and emotional aspects of performing in public under pressure. This is the not so secret “secret weapon” of dominant performers.

The happiest and most fulfilled athletes, whether they are an Olympic champion or an intermediate level junior stuck on a frustrating plateau, are the ones who relish the journey and look inside themselves for the answers. Their passion is indomitable and their enjoyment is boundless.

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### **Links:**

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