

10 COSTLY MENTAL GAME MISTAKES ATHLETES MAKE BEFORE COMPETITION



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WHAT EVERY ATHLETE
AND COACH MUST KNOW TO
IMPROVE MENTAL PREPARATION

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Most every competitive athlete experiences what I call positive pregame jitters – the feelings of excitement prior to competition. However, many of these athletes experience more than just jitters; they have performance anxiety – a sinking feeling in the pit of their stomach. Pregame jitters are a natural part of sports, but pregame performance anxiety will cause most athletes to tense up and not perform up to their ability.

Pregame jitters can cause you to lose sleep the night before competition. You might not be able to eat a regular meal the morning of a game. The pre-competition jitters may make you feel like you want to throw up. But for many athletes, pregame jitters instill a positive tingling of excitement in anticipation for competition.

You actually want to have positive pregame jitters that will help instill an optimal level of mental activation, which can boost focus. However, too little or too much physical activation (or anxiety) is not ideal for finding a flow or peak performance. Your ability to learn how to cope effectively with pregame anxiety is critical to consistent performance. Your pregame mental preparation is the best time to manage your emotions and thoughts about your upcoming performance! Let’s discover if you are committing one of the 10 “deadly” mistakes during your pregame preparation...

PREGAME MISTAKE #1:

Placing strict expectations on your performance

“Replace expectations with small manageable objectives”

Despite what others have taught you about positive expectations, maintaining high, strict performance expectations can actually limit your success. One baseball pitcher I worked with would think, “I must throw a no-hitter in the game today,” and unravel when someone got a hit off him. I teach my students the hazards of strict expectations and how to identify strict expectations. Your goal is to replace expectations with manageable objectives.

“You set yourself up for a success/failure proposition”

Why do expectations limit your performance? First, you set yourself up for a success/failure proposition. You either achieve your expectations or fail to achieve them. Second, if you don’t achieve your predetermined expectations, you tend to question your ability that day - either during or after performance. Essentially, expectations set you up for failure before you even start.

In addition, expectations are usually about results such as obtaining a specific

score or achieving a personal statistic such as a batting average. Athletes often judge their game based on these expectations. In most cases, your expectations equal pressure and pressure can turn into pregame anxiety.

PREGAME MISTAKE #2:

Leaving self-confidence to chance

Self-confidence is paramount in sports. If you have a high level of belief in your ability, you will not become anxious. Many athletes who lack self-confidence in their ability leave their confidence to chance. If you only feel confident when you make a couple strong plays at the start of the game, your confidence is prone to vary widely.

Are you unsure how you will perform prior to competition? I teach my students how to be proactive with their pregame confidence. You don't want your confidence to be thrashed around by immediate results at the start of the

game. What happens if you start the competition with errors? You want a proactive approach to confidence – not a reactive approach.

PREGAME MISTAKE #3:

Getting distracted by the hoopla of the game

The hoopla or atmosphere of playing in the big game such as a high school state championship, NCAA national championships, or national tennis or junior golf tournaments, for example, distracts athletes during the pregame routine. Do you feel additional pressure to perform well in the big game when the hype leading up to the big game causes you stress?

Why do you think the super bowl has two weeks of hype after the conference championships? The media can jump on all the stories and expose every nugget of information about the players and coaches. If you allow the pregame hoopla to distract you from your real mission, you will not be fully prepared to compete.



PREGAME MISTAKE #4:

Carrying life’s worries into sports

Some athletes have trouble “parking” life events or daily life hassles when they enter competition. Whether the issue is a term paper or a daily hassle such as paying bills, one goal of mental preparation is your ability to separate your life from sports.

If you take life’s worries into competition, you will be distracted and not fully focus on the task. Do you have trouble separating your roles outside of sports with your role as an athlete?

PREGAME MISTAKE #5:

Over-thinking your game before competition

Perfectionists in individual sports, such as golf and tennis, spend too much time in a training mindset just prior to competition. I use the analogy of cramming for an upcoming test. Your best option is to study every day instead of waiting until the last moment to cram all night for the test. In sports, you never want to cram during the final week before the competition.

*“Your goal is
to feel
prepared
both
PHYSICALLY
& MENTALLY”*

Your goal is to feel prepared when you compete – both physically and mentally. However, you don’t want to panic the last two days and start to rework your mechanics or technique to ensure you perform well.

PREGAME MISTAKE #6:

Worrying too much about results or outcomes

Your pregame worry, anxiety, or tension can come from several sources depending on your personality. What causes you to become anxious or stressed is different than what another athlete experiences. I think that most worry comes from focusing too much on results or more specifically, the consequences of results.

For example, a golfer might worry about shooting a high score, but the real anxiety might be directed at the fear of embarrassment or letting a parent down. Your worry about the consequences of shooting a poor score is the most stressful part. You might be the most anxious about what you think others might say or think about you if you don't play well.

PREGAME MISTAKE #7:

Poor tactical planning or lack of a game plan

You should never enter competition without a game plan, race strategy or strategy. In team sports, most coaches give you the game plan. On the other hand, individual athletes must develop their own game plans and strategies. You want to have a game plan that helps you play to your strengths and your opponent’s weaknesses.

PREGAME MISTAKE #8:

Psyching yourself out before competition

Do you compare yourself to your competitors before competition? Some athletes I know place too much emphasis on their competitors’ prowess, and come to feel they don’t “stack up” or deserve to win. Your confidence can quickly go in the tank when you make comparisons to other athletes who you

The mind is a powerful thing and most people don't use it properly"

~Mark Maguire

think are better than you. Besides, you can't focus your best if you are distracted by gawking at your competitors.

PREGAME MISTAKE #9:

Worrying too much about what others think

For many athletes, a massive source of pregame worry about performance comes from a need to have others “approve” of their performance. If this is you, you might have the need to be admired, accepted, respected, or liked by other people. You worry about performing poorly because you think it may influence what others think about you.

Thus, if you crave approval from others, you are more likely to become anxious or are afraid to fail in competition. Your need for social approval underlies and supports fear of failure.

What happens when you want others’ approval, but can’t get it? Stress! Many people who need others’ approval to feel good about themselves are prone to pregame anxiety.

*“Success
is where
preparation
and
opportunity
meet”*

~Bobby Unser

PREGAME MISTAKE #10:

Allowing fear of failure to be the top motivator

Fear of failure occurs when athletes are motivated by not losing or not making mistakes. The root causes are complex, but fear of failure usually starts when athletes worry about the potential consequences of failure. There are several secondary issues related to this fear, including anxiety, tension, pregame anxiety, trying too hard and lack of trust – just to mention a few.

I work with my students every day on these common mental errors. The objective is to understand how you might be sabotaging your performance with ineffective attitudes or poor focus.

Your mental preparation is one aspect of your performance you have total control. Do not leave mental preparation to chance or external forces that you can't control, such as your opponents, the conditions of the course or track, weather conditions or the level of officiating.

Once you complete your physical training, you want to enter competition with confidence and focus. Be proactive and take personal responsibility for your mental game or mindset before every competition!

The Top Six Objectives of Your Pregame Mental Preparation

Consistent mental preparation leads to consistent performance, the hallmark of champion athletes. Your pregame warm up or routine is an excellent time to integrate your mental strategies.

You should think of your pregame routine as your final mental tune-up prior to competition. It has six important purposes: (1) to feel prepared, (2) to instill confidence, (3) to focus the mind, (4) to prepare for adversity, (5) to have a game plan, and (6) to enter the role of athlete.

Your main objective of pregame mental preparation is to achieve a focused, confident and trusting mindset prior to competition. Below are the six major objectives you’ll want to accomplish.



|1| To feel prepared and ready

When you feel prepared, you feel more confident. When you feel fully prepared, you feel ready to play your best too. Everything you do prior to competition (practice, workouts, assessing the competition) helps you feel ready to compete. Of course, you have to put in the time to work on your skills prior to competition, but then you must trust in the training and practice you have completed.

|2| To feel confident in one’s skills

Confidence is the number one objective of your mental preparation. Confidence without strict expectations is my “formula for success.” Confidence comes from many sources depending on each athlete, including practice, preparation, game plans and the pregame mindsets you bring to the game.

Confidence is a long-term project, and develops from years of practice and play. Most athletes should have a good foundation of confidence – one based

on past successes and practice. However, some athletes doubt themselves at the worst possible time – during the pregame warm up. For more information, see “The Confident Athlete” CD program at Peaksports.com.

“The ideal attitude is to be physically loose and mentally tight”

~Arthur Ashe

|3| To focus on execution

What you focus on prior to competition is critical to your mental game success. I teach athletes where to direct their focus and how to improve their refocusing skills when competing.

Your concentration or ability to control what you focus on may be the single most important mental skill, second only to confidence. If you struggle with maintaining your focus, you will make more mental errors, get distracted easily, and under perform. If you can focus well while reading this book, you likely have the power to concentrate even if for short periods of time. But most athletes do get distracted at times, are unable to keep focused at the

end of competition, or sometimes misplace their focus during competition. For more information, see “The Focused Athlete” at PeakSports.com.

|4| To prepare to cope with adversity

I could probably write an entire book about this often overlooked component of pregame mental preparation. With experience, athletes learn how to cope with any adversity – with situations that could cause them to lose focus, confidence or composure.

If you haven’t experienced much adversity, you’ll have to anticipate the challenges that might affect your mindset, and develop strategies to cope with each. Your goal is to be prepared mentally for anything that may happen in competition, such as getting a flat tire in the race, and be able to cope effectively.

|5| To have a game plan or strategy

In most team sports, coaches give athletes a game plan. However, athletes who participate in individual sports, such as running, golf, tennis and racing, must develop their own plans and strategies.

A game plan is composed of strategies and tactics designed to give the team (or individual athlete) the best chance of winning. A game plan usually includes the plays the team might select to run, the strategy a tennis player applies to beat an opponent based on his strengths and the opponent’s weaknesses, or a baseball player’s strategy at the plate based on previous experience with the pitcher.

|6| To fully enter the role of the athlete

I use this phrase to help athletes transition between life and sports. I want my students to shelve any life challenges or hassles, and learn how to focus attention fully on competition.

The warm up or pregame routine is a time to begin focusing on your sport. Think of your routine as a transition from the office, school, or normal activities to competing in sports. Some athletes are distracted about life issues when they play sports, and this affects their focus and performance. You’ll want to use your pregame routine to let go of daily hassles, deadlines and chores – to become fully engaged in your sport.

Summary

Your pregame mental preparation is paramount to setting the stage for peak performance. You want to embrace pregame jitters as helpful to your performance. However, if positive jitters turn into anxiety or apprehension about performance, you will not perform with a free mindset or confidently. You must be proactive with your mental preparation and not be wishy-washy about a positive pregame mindset. If you want to learn my top mental strategies for superior pregame preparation, I suggest you look into our newest program in The Confident Athlete Series, ***The Relaxed Athlete: A 14-Day Plan for Optimal Mental Preparation*** CD and workbook.

Take the next step towards **PEAK PERFORMANCE!**



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The Confident Athlete CD and workbook series, our mental training best seller, combines Dr. Cohn's 20 plus years of experience and research in a cutting-edge mental training system for athletes. Each CD and workbook program includes two power-packed CDs and a step-by-step workbook that guides you through **14 days of performance-boosting strategies**. Learn the secret to staying confident, composed, relaxed, focused, and fearless in practice and competition.

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