



Inside the Zone

SPORTS PERFORMANCE GROUP, LLC

"You can't control the future but you can prepare for it" – Rob Polishook

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Slumps, Chokes, and the Yips Understanding Performance Blocks

BY ROB POLISHOOK, MA, CPC

How many times have you seen an athlete get tight, underperform, or choke in a big event? In practice they play great - not a care in the world, going for broke on every shot, and effortlessly succeed while doing so. Yet once the competition starts, their best shots become their worst. Perhaps their big forehand, previously a weapon, turns defensive. Or maybe the formerly simple act of a two-foot putt now becomes unmanageable. Suddenly the reliable catcher can't make a routine throw back to the pitcher. Inexplicably, the runner hesitates during a pivotal point in the race. Fans become dumbfounded, and cannot believe that an elite athlete can succumb to this type of pressure. "How can this happen? What's the cause of this?" they ask.

In looking for the solution, many coaches, fans, players, media and even performance experts start by critiquing what they can see (i.e. the double faults, missed free throws, or errant putts). Their initial intent is to look above the surface to find what's broken in hopes of a technical quick fix. Certainly, this is the place to look if the situation occurs once or twice. However, if the choke or slump continues repeatedly under pressure, it falls in the category of a repetitive sports performance block.

A repetitive sports performance block (i.e. choke, slump, yips) is actually the *symptom* of an underlying issue. The *cause* is an accumulation of trauma-like experiences that the athlete has not been able to move on from. In actuality, this block has little to do with the last time the player "choked." Rather, something about that pressure situation was the trigger that brought the unprocessed issue to the surface where it distracted the athlete's performance. In fact, before or during the competition, some athletes are aware that "something is just not right." They experience underlying nervousness and anxiety and

try to hide or resist it. Often times, the athlete doesn't want to address their anxiousness for fear of being judged by teammates or fans as lacking mental toughness. Yet other times, the athlete may be completely unaware of the root cause of their anxiety, since it has been disassociated from their consciousness in an effort to protect their personal psyche. Either way, the athlete's performance bears the burden.

Much like "baggage" we hold onto on a daily basis, these trauma-like experiences grip a person and can accumulate during a person's life from both on and off the field incidents. The emotional trauma can come from situations such as embarrassment from double faulting in a big match, striking out with the bases loaded in the bottom of the ninth inning, or repeatedly missing putts on your short game. The physical trauma can derive from getting beamed with a ball, getting blindsided on the football field, or lying face down in pain after your ankle gave way on a wide forehand. Additionally, off-field trauma can occur and accumulate stemming from issues such as divorce, death, car accidents, or other traumatic circumstances. Similarly, excessive judgment, expectations, and comparisons from parents, coaches, media, or friends can also unknowingly add weight to the burden of pressure and distract a player from playing freely.

Throughout our lives we encounter physical and emotional trauma-like experiences. Depending upon the severity of these instances and our preparedness to meet them at the time, we sometimes successfully absorb and process through these encounters, and other times we do not. When we are unable to process these traumas, the stress does not evaporate over time. Rather, we store the unprocessed memory inside, where it may show itself at unexpected times. For instance, a baseball player who

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had been beamed by a pitch may be scared to get back in the batters box, sometimes without admitting it to himself, and certainly not to his teammates. Or perhaps a tennis player may be so scared of losing or making the same error from previous matches they tense up, hesitate, or even freeze during current matches.

These unprocessed negative experiences can accumulate like balls in a bucket. Each individual issue represents a different size ball. Some may be small like the size of a golf ball, others bigger like a tennis ball, and then still bigger like a football, depending upon the level of stress and trauma the person/athlete carries. These emotional/physical trauma-like experiences get held in the body's central nervous system. They directly interfere with the athlete's ability to access and adapt to situations and perform movements that were once so easy and instinctual. Finally, when a ball tumbles out of the bucket, the player's repetitive sports performance block is now on public display for all to see, judge, and evaluate.

We often forget that behind the superstar athlete's exterior, the athlete is a person first and performer second. It's almost impossible not to be affected by the day-to-day

troubling events which we all experience. Each person holds onto different things in different ways. James Blake summed it up best in his autobiography *Breaking Back*, explaining, *"If there is something wrong in your life, it'll show up in your tennis game-not always in predictable ways...self belief might be manifested in weak second serves, impatience can cause you to make low-percentage gambles, and so on."*

In summary, it's clear to see how we hold emotional (fears) and physical (injuries) trauma-like experiences in our bodies. As a person this "baggage" can consciously or unconsciously affect how we react, adapt and adjust to everyday situations. As a player it can also carry onto the playing field and affect an athlete's ability to perform, especially in a high-pressure situation. In light of this, it makes sense to look beyond the slump, choke, or yips, below the surface to the root cause. The athlete is not irreparably damaged, broken, or a "head case," as some suggest. The block is part of their process and actually can be a valuable clue to turning their situation around. Ultimately, they will emerge mentally stronger, move without hesitation, and compete with increased confidence.



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