

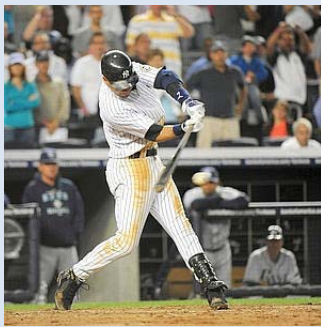
Managing Pressure in Competition

It seems like each year there are certain athletes who come to the forefront and excel on the biggest stage in sports. Derek Jeter, Kobe Bryant, Roger Federer, and Michael Phelps are names that immediately come to mind when we discuss all time clutch performers.



In my career as a professional baseball player, I had the unique opportunity to be a part of some very pressure filled situations. I also had the luxury of witnessing some of the best baseball players of all time succeed time after time under extreme pressure. My experiences and observations in playing with some of the best athletes in the world taught me keys to tame anxiety and succeed under pressure. The following are a few tips for players and coaches to handle pressure situations:

Preparation Leads to Confidence



As you watch big sporting events such as the World Series, Super Bowl, the Masters, Wimbledon, or the Olympics, listen to what the heroes say in their interviews after they win. You will often hear them mention their preparation, game plan or strategy, and that the key to their success was the execution of that strategy. You rarely hear pitchers talk about how hard they were throwing or how well their curve ball was breaking. They typically mention that they were able to execute their pitches, stay ahead in the count, and utilize their game plan to win the game.

Whether it is Little League or the World Series, preparation begets confidence. If you feel confident in the preparation of your game plan, mechanics and fundamentals, it directly translates into better execution in intense situations. In more practical terms, think of what you do before taking a test or making a big presentation. If you are prepared, you feel confident. If you are confident, you are more likely to stay focused on the execution of your strategy. If you stay focused, you are more likely to execute that strategy successfully. The bottom line: If you spend ample time preparing, you will feel more relaxed and confident when it comes time to perform under pressure.

No Surprises!

One of the many great coaches I had during my career always told me that I should never be surprised by a situation on the baseball field. His theory is that if you continually envision and practice putting yourself in big game situations, you will perform better under pressure.



A great example comes to mind: Phil Mickelson made a difficult putt to win his first Masters Golf Tournament. In an interview immediately following, he was asked how he handled the pressure of that putt, knowing how much was at stake should he miss. He responded, simply, that he'd hit that exact putt to win the Masters a million times....on the practice green. In his mind, this putt was no different than those putts on the practice green. He drew from his envisioned experiences of putting himself in the most extreme and stressful situations in practice, which inevitably enabled him to succeed.

Every great player practices and prepares tirelessly for the big putt, the big shot, the big hit, or the big relay anchor so that when they are faced with that situation in their respective competition, *they already know what to expect*. They have been there and done that before.



Keep Things Simple

Whether you are in game 7 of the World Series, in the first game of little league season, or the relay anchor on the US Olympic Swim Team, *your job remains the same*. Execute your fundamentals and strategy in that moment. As a pitcher, determine what pitch to throw and make that pitch. As a hitter, pick out a good pitch to hit and put a great swing on the ball. The situation is irrelevant to your task. Even if you are facing Albert Pujols in the seventh game of the World Series, your task as a pitcher is to simply decide what pitch to throw and execute it. If you execute your pitch, you have the greatest odds of success. The rest is out of your hands as an athlete. Keeping it simple is pretty easy--*if you allow yourself to do so*. Focus on the task at hand and stay in the moment!

That is surely easier said than done, but the best, most successful athletes are able to sort through all the pressure and boil each situation down to the bare necessities. Elite athletes adhere to their normal routines and thought processes which allow them to remain calm and focus on the simplest things. Nothing more, nothing less.



Prepare and execute well, and luck will be on your side in competition!

- Brad Woodall; *Owner, Woodall Baseball Instruction
Former Major League Pitcher and Professional Coach*

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