



Are You Ready To Jump off the Cliff?

By Todd M. Kays, Ph.D.
Sport Psychologist

Many athletes train for weeks and months only to come to competition and not execute. This is painfully frustrating. They train hard, do all of the right things, but then don't perform like they know how. WHY? The problem is the way they mentally view competition. Athletes will train – like running along a high, steep cliff - this is the hard, grueling and sometimes tedious work. However, instead of continuing this flow and jumping with exhilaration off the cliff – actual competition – they slow, stutter, hesitate and sometimes stop right before the edge. *The exciting part is jumping off the cliff (competition) and running to the edge is the hard work (training and practice).* Why do all of the hard work and then not enjoy the jump? Athletes pay too much attention to outcomes, fears and worries when it comes to competition and let their mental demons ruin it. If you want to perform your best, allow yourself to enjoy and embrace competition, not fear it. The hard part is training, the wonderful part is competition. So begin taking the following steps:

1. Competition is the Reward

It is important to view competition as reward for all of the hard work and training. This is the time to enjoy and trust your skills and training. Many athletes train hard – the real grind and sometimes boring component – and then not enjoy competing. They allow fear, worry and focus on outcomes to “rain on the parade” so to speak. Practice is the hard part, competing is the reward. When you have fun with competition, you perform your best!

2. Stay Focused on the Process

It is easier to stay focused on the process when practicing. As competition approaches, however, numerous athletes turn their focus from process to outcome. They think about winning or losing, ramifications of losing, and potential reactions of fans and coaches. This focus on outcomes and the resulting anxiety prevents athletes from performing their best (i.e., the exhilaration of jumping off the cliff). Clear process goals get them to the edge of the cliff and maintaining focus on these process goals allows great performance in competition, or in other words, the exhilarating jump from the cliff.

3. Be Task-Oriented in Competition

When competition arrives, athletes' focus needs to be simple. The training and hard work have been done and now it is only a matter of focusing on the task at hand and letting their body do what they have trained it to do. If athletes start feeling fear and worry, however, they need to use their "go to" keywords to come back to the task at hand. This task needs to be simple, such as "Just compete", "Relax" or "Have fun." At the point of competition, skills are in place and not going to change; it is just a matter of whether athletes mentally allow their skills to come out and play!

Play Smart, Play Hard, Play Well!