



## DR. K'S MENTAL MINUTE

THE ATHLETIC MIND INSTITUTE

### **Pressure – It Only Exists in the Mind**

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More and more athletes are seeking sports psychologists to deal with pressure – pressure from themselves, coaches, teammates, media, sponsors, contracts and a whole host of other reasons. At all levels of sports, athletes discuss how pressure hurts their performance. Professional athletes feel the pressure to make money since sports is their job. Phil Mickelson and Colin Montgomerie felt a different type of pressure in the U.S. Open this past month, but pressure nonetheless. College student athletes experience pressure from themselves, coaches, teammates, fans, academics, and parents. High school and middle school student athletes also experience pressure – again from themselves, coaches, college recruiters, parents, family, school, and tradition. Pressure is one of those things that does exist in the world and is something that I teach athletes how to manage, but in reality, pressure only exists in the mind.

Pressure comes directly from an individual. Athletes may feel that pressure is coming from a variety of sources, but pressure is actually something they create in their mind. It is their perception and self-talk that creates the pressure. Pressure does not tangibly exist in the athletic realm. In fact, no athlete has been able to show “pressure” to me. They have been able to show me an object, such as a soccer ball, tennis racket or putter, but they have not been able to bring forth “pressure.” They may even be able to describe and visibly show me the symptoms associated with pressure, such as an increase in heart rate, sweaty palms, and/or muscle tension, but they have never been able to physically show me “pressure.”

Pressure is something that exists in the mind. The skill of making a free kick in soccer is the same whether in practice or competition. The act of making a free throw is the same whether it is during an NBA Finals series or at practice. When a golfer can groove 50 drivers on the range and then not be able to do so on the course, pressure has negatively manipulated the mind. A golfer’s actual swing between the range and the course has not changed in anyway nor has the way an athlete shoots a free throw or makes a free kick– again the only thing that has changed is what goes on in the six inches between the ears.

Even though pressure does not tangibly exist, it has done its fair share of damage in the world of athletics. One can look at the Dallas Mavericks in the last four games of the NBA Finals and Colin Montgomerie or Phil Mickelson in the U.S. Open. In fact, any athlete can think about how he or she has allowed pressure to disrupt his or her true athletic potential. For something that does not actually exist, pressure does have quite a bit of power! Athletes must realize, however, that if they are feeling pressure, *they* are

creating the it. And if they have the power to create it, *they* also have the power to manage and eliminate it.

One key way to manage pressure is to know that it exists only in the mind. If athletes feel pressure, they are creating it. If athletes feel confident, they are creating it. Many times athletes will describe how well they performed days before a competition, but then how they were unable to execute in the same manner during game time. They knew they were capable of performing because they had done it numerous times in practice, but they could not execute when it counted. Pressure.

Athletes also need to stop and become aware of the thoughts creating the pressure - are they worried about impressing a coach or parent? Concerned about losing? Embarrassing themselves? Worried about making a mistake and being pulled from the game? These are some of the more common thoughts that take place in the mind of an athlete feeling pressure. But when one stops and thinks about it, an athlete does not have any control over the matters related to these questions. They have control over their own performance and nothing more.

The point is that athletes must train their minds to be and remain in a consistent place where their thoughts create the desired mental state – relaxed, composed, focused, and confident. High amounts of pressure will typically have a negative impact upon athletic performance. Thus, athletes must focus on the things within their control – THEIR preparation, effort, diet, training, and mental awareness – these things do not produce pressure in your mind.

Play Hard, Play Smart and Play Well!