

Overcoming Sports Performance Anxiety

By Carol Krucoff

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When golfer Greg Norman blew a six-stroke lead to lose the Masters golf tournament in Augusta, Ga., last month, some fans were furious. But the hearts of countless others went out to the competitor known as "The Shark," whose series of spectacular defeats suggest recurring bouts of performance anxiety.

Being ahead or favored to win can actually worsen an athlete's performance anxiety, says Sean McCann, senior sports psychologist at the U.S. Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs. "Athletes who go in as favorites tend to

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think, 'This competition is mine to lose,' " he says. "Then, fear of failure starts to change their competitive behavior. They begin thinking too much or become less willing to take risks, which can weaken their performance."

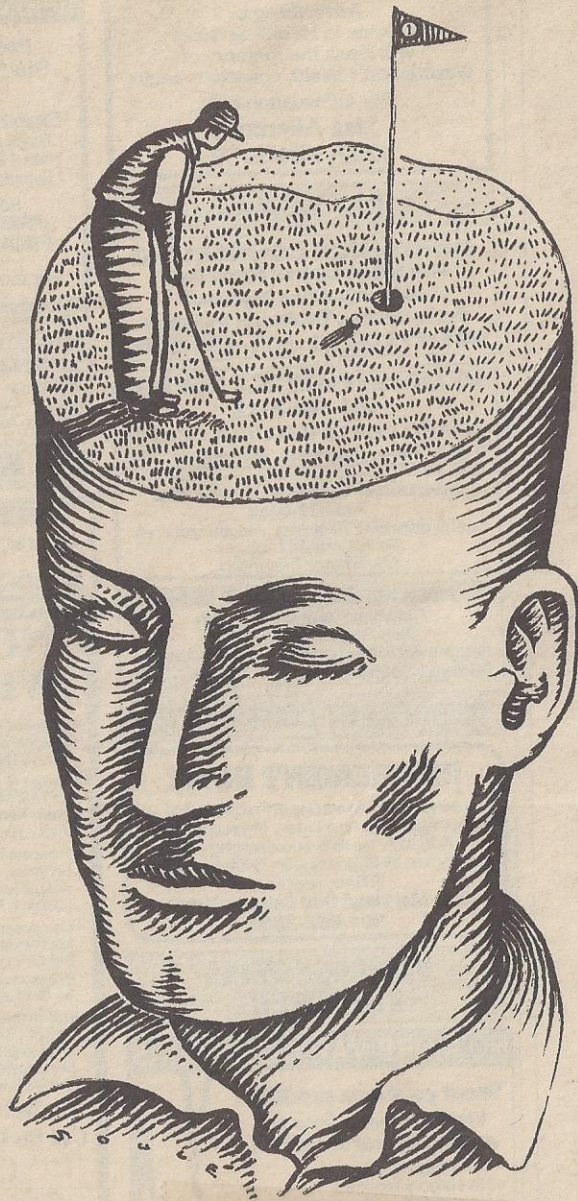
In contrast, scrappy young unknowns, free of the baggage of others' expectations, may have a healthier competitive mind-set. "They've got a chance for glory and nothing to lose," McCann says. "Those are typically the athletes who pull off upsets of the favorites."

In Olympic competition, performance anxiety is often worst during the pregame trials. "Once you make the team, you're an Olympian for life, regardless of whether or not you get a medal," he notes. "But some sports have only one or two slots on the team. So the trials can be harder than the Olympics, where there are at least three chances for a medal."

McCann recommends three techniques for overcoming sports performance anxiety:

- Recognize it's going to happen. "Don't be worried about being worried," he says.
- Practice "stress inoculation." Structure some training sessions to be as much like the real contest as possible. Bring in judges and compete in an event-like setting. "This gives the athlete small doses of stress," he says, "so they'll be better able to handle the real thing."
- Focus on the task, not the outcome. Don't think about the trophy; concentrate instead on the job at hand.

When unwanted thoughts intrude, "rotten potato them," advises Atlanta sports psychologist James Millhouse. "Treat negative thoughts as if they were smelly, rotten potatoes and mentally throw them as far away as possible."



Negative thinking can lead to adverse physiological changes, like tight muscles and shallow breathing, which can hamper performance. "That's why mental training is critical for athletes, particularly at the elite level," Millhouse says. "Because just about everyone who gets to the Olympics is very, very close in their physical ability to execute the skills. The biggest difference is how they employ those skills, and that's mental. The athlete who can put it together, that day, under all that pressure, is the one who wins."

Positive thoughts can lead to victory, says sports psychologist Bruce Ogilvie, professor emeritus at San Jose State University. "To attain a state of mastery," he says, "athletes need to achieve a psychology of total faith in what they're about to do." He advises athletes to stick with self-affirming mental messages, such as "I've done all my physical homework, I can make it happen." Instead of worrying about weak spots, focus on strengths. "Tell yourself, 'Nobody can touch me in my short game,'" he says. "Or, 'I own this course.'"

Visualization also helps. "We know from research that when athletes get into a relaxed mental state and do a visual, motor rehearsal, taking themselves through their best game, that gets right into the central nervous system," Ogilvie says. He advises competitors to "run a tape on the back of your eyelids where you see yourself accomplishing all your goals."

During competition, "remain inwardly focused," he says. "Treat background noise like a tap running. If it bothers you, turn off the tap."

The most important mental skill is learning to keep winning and losing in perspective, says University of Virginia sports psychologist Bob Rotella. "Too many people think that if they don't win they'll die," he says. "But competition is just a reason we make up to play the game. Athletes play the game not just to win, but because they love their sport. And competition helps them play better. So it's important to have the proper attitude about competing, which is to enjoy the challenge of it and to have fun seeing how good you can get at your sport."

Being nervous is not only natural, "it's what releases the adrenalin to perform at a world-class level," Rotella says. "Most great athletes get nervous, and they love the experience of testing themselves. It's an extraordinary sensation that can make you stronger and quicker and all of your senses sharper."

The nervous flush of competition "is one of life's peak experiences," Rotella says. "If you want to feel ordinary, stay home."

—ILLUSTRATION BY ROBERT ALAN SOULE FOR THE WASHINGTON POST