

The Champion's Mindset – High Performance Under Pressure

By Ted Buffington

Focus, Fold or Freeze?

Suddenly, you find yourself facing the possibility of a “out-of-contention” type of situation because of a few unexpected ‘hiccups’ in your performance. Your mind begins to both ‘wonder and wander.’ You try hard to fight off your overwhelming sense of failure, disappointment and disbelief. After a few moments of shock and awe, you start to settle into the reality of the situation.

Somewhere in your mind a program kicks in. There is an unconscious, invisible design and process at work. Through the myriad of images, self talk, physical stress, and conflicting emotions, you eventually reach a mindset – an interpretation, opinion, judgment, inference, and belief of the immediate and possible realities. The end result of your processing will determine how you deal with the situation at hand. You get a second chance. You are down. But are you out? Only moments to go until you get that last chance to perform again; your options: focus – go into the zone, fold – fall apart and choke, or freeze – go deer in the headlights.

Focus, fold, and freeze performance factors are the result of awareness and perception training – or a lack thereof. “That which is natural is invisible.” Simply put, this means that the better you are at something, the less access you have to your reflexes and what triggers those reflexes. Keep in mind that a reflex is simply a conditioned response or reaction. It has no intrinsic value of good or bad, right or wrong until it is perceived as such.

Your reflexes are the result of your conditioned performance patterns, habits and behaviors. Overtime, repetitive thoughts and actions carve grooves and ruts into the neuro-pathways of your brain much like water flow can carve pathways in land, mountains, and rocks. This is how physical muscle memory develops. There is also mental muscle memory that gets conditioned to respond or react. When you can't repair those grooves you must learn to redirect the flow.

To be the best at anything requires getting access to the grooves, habits, behaviors, and performance triggers. When you do you can control them to get into and maintain the zone. And, that is the difference that makes the difference.

The secret to achieving lies in knowing what you have to do right versus thinking about what not to do wrong.

You must practice imagery and visualizations of performing under pressure situations to be ready when they occur. Going from good to great requires mental rehearsal and preparation for that moment when you will have no other option but to pull it all together and achieve.

“Only those who have gone too far know how far they can go.” Your mindsets define your comfort zone and determine whether you expand it or shrink it.

“When the going gets tough, the tough get focused.” This only becomes a cliché if you don't know HOW to access the mindset triggers to get you going – especially against all odds. How many times have we seen injured performers rally to compete and win? A gold, silver or bronze medal; winning & losing; achieving & succeeding can be measured in fractions of time or points and it is mindset skills make the difference.

Ask any champion what is the most important part of their strategy to achieve. They will all tell you things like, focus, attitude, discipline and the ability to let go of negative thoughts. That is all good advice but what does that mean, exactly? HOW do they trigger those mindsets? Is the ‘trigger’ an image, a certain word, a phrase, a song, a prayer, a change in posture? WHAT is the trigger? HOW do they condition it and tap into it?

Stuff does happen - learn HOW to deal with it.

The “triggers” may be different for each athlete but the one thing that is consistent in conditioning the triggers is – asking questions. The greatest tool you have is the question and the greatest question is HOW not ‘why.’

As I stated before, ‘that which is natural is invisible.’ Learn what questions to ask and HOW to ask them to make performance processes visible. Learn to observe and assess the subtleties and nuances of your mental & behavioral processes in a non-judgmental way. Learn to feed that information back into your performance in a way that is non-judgmental and produces an intended result. And, in that lies the key to unlocking the champion mindset.

Ted Buffington, aka the ‘Mindset Guy’ is a writer and internationally recognized researcher, and keynote speaker in the field of sports psychology methodologies and **Mental Game Development** skills.

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