FEAR OF FAILURE IN THE CONTEXT OF COMPETITIVE SPORT

By Allen Fox

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Introduction

In my years of consulting with competitive tennis players, I have encountered a varied host of mental difficulties, but through it all a certain general pattern has emerged. A vast majority of mental difficulties can be traced back to the fear of failure. The sequence is roughly as follows: Fear of failure emanates from the enormous discrepancy between the practical and psychological consequences of winning versus losing, and the inherent uncertainty of outcome in any closely contested athletic contest. Winning is highly rewarding, and losing is extremely painful. The rub comes from the fact that regardless of how hard athletes try to win or how well they train, prepare, concentrate and attempt to control their emotions, they still may fail in execution. (This, of course, is what makes sport so compelling to spectators.)

Stress, anxiety and escapism

The common consequence is high-intensity, unpleasant stress – particularly in individual sports that take place over long periods of time – stress that the successful athlete handles well and the less successful athlete handles poorly. With the latter, the subconscious effort to relieve stress during competition produces a variety of escape responses that are counterproductive to the goal of winning. Among these are anger, acceptance of defeat and reduced drive to win, loss of focus and concentration, and an assortment of other defensive rationalizations and excuses. All of these are instinctive, subconscious techniques that function to reduce the stress of competition and mask the fear of failure.

The structure of the situation, in which one outcome is very pleasant and the other is very painful and the participants (try as they might) cannot control it, is tailor-made for stress, anxiety and escapism. By way of analogy, I have seen a similar paradigm in a psychology experiment. Dogs were strapped into an apparatus and, when shown an illuminated circle on a screen, they could press a bar and receive a reward of food. Of course they soon learned to press the bar to get the food. Then they were shown an illuminated ellipse on the screen. If they pressed the bar in this case, they were given a painful electric shock. They soon learned not to press the bar when the ellipse appeared. So far, so good.

Then came the tricky part. The experimenters began to change the shape of the ellipse to make it look more like a circle. The time finally arrived when the dogs could not tell the difference between the circle and the ellipse, making the task of discrimination impossible.

Yet the dogs continued to try to figure it out and press the bar, sometimes getting the food and sometimes the shock. As a result, the dogs became increasingly agitated and disturbed, entering a state of what the experimenters termed “experimental neurosis.” They yelped and squirmed to avoid being put into the harness. Of course they could stop pressing the bar regardless of what it saw on the screen to avoid the shocks, but the dogs kept trying to solve an impossible problem. So they were randomly rewarded and punished while attempting to control an uncontrollable outcome. As a result, the dogs become very nervous and tried to escape this stressful and unpleasant situation – much as athletes often do in an analogous situation.

The usual means of escape from the stress, uncertainty and uncontrollability of competition is to become angry, make excuses, focus on and complain about “problems” rather than work to solve them, or simply give up.

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competition. Standing unemotionally on the sidelines, it is obvious that the alternative is counterproductive. After the emotions have dissipated and over a cold sports drink in the clubhouse, even the athletes will agree that losing their heads was not a good idea. But what leaves coaches perplexed is that after discussing the situation and agreeing on the obvious benefits of remaining cool and motivated on the field, the athletes will go back out and do the same thing again!

**Coaching tools**

The reason, of course, is that logic and emotion are like oil and water—they don’t mix (at least they don’t mix quickly). The coach and athlete (or psychologist and athlete) usually are in agreement when they are both in the logic mode, but the situation on the field or court is different. It is emotionally driven, and in the throes of strong emotion, logic usually is the first casualty. Depending on the sport and situation, the coach may have the option of using fear and coercion to overpower the athlete's counterproductive defense mechanisms. With a coach like Bob Knight, for example, the athletes often were more afraid of him than anything else.

Logic is a second tool that coaches and psychologists can use to bring about change. Here one tries to convince the athletes to use their conscious logic system to overpower emotional propensities to behave counterproductively. The appeal is basically to the athletes' desire to win and their understanding (obvious as it may seem) that getting angry, frustrated, dejected or making excuses simply will reduce the chances for victory. The use of force and fear are simpler and easier to apply. Effective appeals to logic are more complex. They require subtlety—even artistic talent—on the part of the practitioner, because the athletes are not receiving information that is actually new. They already know that counterproductive emotions increase the odds of failure. They just are not sufficiently motivated to do anything about it.

Sports psychologists and coaches in certain sports cannot generally use force or fear, so they must work to persuade the athlete. This requires, on their parts, exceptional verbal talent, people skills and patience. They will have to come at the problem repeatedly from different logical angles over a longer period of time than seems reasonable. They must be mentally agile enough to use the athletes’ desire to win in various ways that will make an impact—possess enough “feel” to somehow get into the athletes’ heads—without simply repeating themselves and becoming boring. It is a tightrope.

The same simple problem recurs and the same simple solution needs to be reapplied. The trick is to induce the athletes to rethink the problem from some novel angle and come away with the usual and only proper conclusion—that they must control the errant emotions.

The information itself is not rocket science. The athletes are well aware that losing their heads often gets them beaten. The problem is getting them to do something about it. This ultimately is a matter of persuading the athletes to decide, at a deep level, to stay practical and on track toward their goal and forgo tempting but counterproductive emotional escape responses. This process is difficult because the athletes’ urges to escape from stress, uncertainty and frustration are natural, powerful and, most important, don’t ever go away.

Suppressing these urges requires constant, conscious vigilance. They lurk, a permanent fixture below the edge of consciousness, ready to pounce. If, for any reason, the athlete mentally tires and loses discipline, out will pop the defenses. It is a never-ending battle and usually requires repeated doses of motivational input.

**Overcoming the urge to escape**

Coaches wonder why players, who seem to “get it” for periods of time, frequently revert to old counterproductive emotional habits. They do so because as much as they claim to understand, they don’t really get it. And by “getting it,” I mean that they haven’t committed deeply enough to overpowering their escapist proclivities. They are really cured only when the light bulb goes off in their heads and they decide that they are not going to do those irrational things that make them lose.

How do I know the problem is motivation rather than information (besides the fact that the information is so obvious that the athlete would have to be in a coma to miss it)? Consider the following thought experiment. If I were to go out on court or field with a gun and tell the athlete that if he or she becomes angry, makes excuses or stops trying I will instantly run over and shoot him or her in the head. In which case, he or she will be dead—a negative consequence that most people find extremely motivating. As long as I am standing there brandishing my gun, I would bet a lot of money that the counterproductive emotions won’t be allowed to take over.

Here the penalty far outweighs the positive reinforcement provided by escapist actions. What it tells me is that the players simply do not want to change badly enough. When they do, change will occur, and it will be immediate.

Because the stress of outcome uncontrollability is always there, so, too, will be the urge to escape. The athletes may control themselves for a while, but the underlying problem will never be solved. Like alcoholics “on the wagon,” athletes must be constantly vigilant against backsliding. If they weaken mentally, the irrationality will return.

**The magic feather**

The anxieties associated with the players’ inability to control outcome ultimately often affect the relationship between athletes and their coaches or psychologists. When athletes begin working with a new psychologist or coach, performance usually improves dramatically. This is because the athletes believe the psychologist or coach is going to provide new tools that will make them win. The athletes are, at this stage, believers. Their faith in the new psychologist or coach reduces the anxieties associated with outcome uncertainty, and this belief makes them play better and win more.

It is analogous to the story of Dumbo and the magic feather. Here the mouse gives Dumbo a feather, telling him it is magic and that whenever he holds it in his trunk, he will be able to fly. So Dumbo flaps his huge ears and, believing in the magical powers of the feather, does in fact fly. While flying, Dumbo drops the feather and starts to fall. The mouse (who is perched in Dumbo’s hat) tells him that the feather never had magical powers at all and that Dumbo was able to fly all along. And so Dumbo, of course, flies without the feather. In sport, the psychologist or coach may serve initially as the athlete’s magic feather. The difference is that when athletes find out that the psychologist or coach has no magic and that the old uncertainty-of-outcome issues remain, they often do not continue flying on their own. Instead, many look elsewhere for help—wanting to join another team, work under another coach or dispense with the sports psychologist.

I call this aspect of the process ‘athlete resistance.’ It occurs after the initial novelty (or honeymoon phase) wears thin. Here the athletes discover that the basic problem of uncontrollable performance (and its related unpleasant anxiety) remains.
Now the athletes begin to notice that many of the psychologist's or coaches' techniques have a familiar ring and they begin to lose their effectiveness. Despite having had some initial success by following instructions, the athletes have ended up with many of the same unresolved problems. Uncertainties, stresses and urges to escape still pop up. At the beginning, the players seldom realize, at a deep level, that in overpowering counter-productive emotions they have to do all the work themselves and that the function of the psychologist or coach merely is to persuade them to do this. Yes, the players may have improved somewhat, but the cure rarely is complete with the initial assault. Maybe, they think, this level of improvement is all that they can hope for. Once the athletes cut themselves loose from strict emotional control, they will have uneven performances, suffering numerous relapses where they let the emotions run loose.

This phase of the process is akin to the overweight person who goes on a strict diet and initially is successful at losing weight. But a fierce and constant effort must be exerted to deny the pleasures of the table. Going against one's instinct to eat tasty, pleasurable foods is difficult. It is, in a sense, levitating. Eventually, the discipline slips and the dieter starts to indulge – just a little bit at first – but the dam has been breached and it is not long before the lost weight returns. It becomes doubly difficult to get back on the diet again because much of the initial motivation has dissipated. Memories of the difficult, prolonged self-denial remain and few people are in a hurry for another dose of unpleasantness – especially because it has, apparently, come to naught.

Like the dieter, after the initial rush and early improvement, athletes often will suffer relapses and vague doubts about the process. They may not be able to climb back on the wagon again. They also may think they know all there is to know and that talking further about it with the psychologist or coach will be futile. They may, at this point, even avoid talking with anyone. An analogy would be like your mother telling you to do your studies – if you haven't done them, the words themselves can become irritating and something to be avoided.

**Conclusion**

The good news is that the message usually gets through eventually – not as quickly as the psychologist or coach might like, but eventually. Athletes finally tire of getting their heads beaten in, and the words of psychologists and coaches take on new and deeper meaning. Part of the process involves the athletes simply becoming more mature human beings and developing a more accurate grasp of reality. At this stage, they begin to realize that there is no magic bullet and that the only person who can save them is themselves. How long this “maturation” process takes is determined by the degree of insecurity of the athletes and the talents of the psychologists and coaches; in my experience it is between one and three years.