

Managing Competition Stress: Understanding & Harnessing this Powerful Force

by Mark Lonsdale

Stress is both a psychological (mental) and physiological (physical) condition that plagues not only athletes but also regular people in their everyday lives. However, the added pressure of high-level competition seems to manifest these stresses in more dramatic and quantifiable ways. Even for the super-cool champion who appears to have ice-water running through his or her veins, stress is still a significant factor. This is especially noticeable when entering a major competition where the stakes are high – for example, making the cut for the World Championships or Olympic team.

Over the years I have trained with numerous athletes who had racked up excellent scores in training and demonstrated considerable skill in their fields of endeavor. But these same promising competitors were unable to reproduce that performance on game day. Lacking sports injuries, illness, or other reasonable explanations, the cause of their failures could often be attributed to match pressure, nerves, stress and fear.

Fear, a close relative of stress, is an interesting phenomenon. It is often triggered by unfamiliar circumstances or a confrontation with unknown forces. For the athlete, this can equate to competing at a venue that is not familiar; against opponents of reportedly superior skill; and in conditions that are not favorable, for example, after a long flight or in a cold stadium. There can also be the more tangible fear of failure, of disappointing one's friends or family, the risk of losing sponsorship, or of not making the final cut for the team.

To remove the “unknown,” as a factor of fear from the equation, it is necessary to develop a level of familiarity and comfort with tournament sites and match conditions. This can be done by creating a strong element of realism in the pre-championship training process and, as the old military adage goes, “For as we fight, so must we train.”

There are a number of ways to make training sessions more closely reflect tournament conditions.

With larger clubs it is possible to run an entire training session as if it were a tournament, complete with referees and video replay. A better method, commonly used in Europe, is to organize a training camp where several clubs and teams can participate. This brings in more players and the opportunity to train under tournament conditions, but without the pressure of winning medals or earning points for the national roster.

Visualization is another proven and powerful tool. Say, for example, you have never competed internationally and your first international championship is to be the Grand Slam in Paris. It is relatively easy to pull up video footage of the previous Grand Slam on YouTube, and even watch many of the international competitors in your same weight division. The Grand Slam is always held at the Palais Omnisports Paris-Bercy (POPB) which has red and yellow tatami, five match areas, and seats 13,500 spectators. You can get a good sense of the stadium and the procedures for the competitors from watching videos. As you do this you can visualize yourself coming in through the chute with your coach, walking to the designated mat and bowing in. You will see all the officials and referees on one side of the stadium and the media cameras and VIPs on the other. You can expect huge applause for the French competitors and very little for you, but that does not concern you. You are focused only on your next fight, next opponent, and your attack plan. As you visualize the stadium you can also practice the positive self-talk or mantra taught to you by your coach, such as, “This is my day, this is my purpose...,” or, “First grip – first attack”

The coach should also be working to structure training so as to best prepare the athlete for each championship. Strength and endurance training are a must, but the randori sessions should also replicate championship conditions. For example, randori should be multiple 5-minute bouts with opponents of a similar weight and ability; and then every so often throw in two additional minutes for Golden Score. In this manner, and by replicating match conditions in the dojo, the athlete should be able to gauge his or her expected performance while developing a familiar comfort zone with the particular match format and duration.

Now to address the less desirable effects of stress. Looking first at the physical aspects, match stress and nerves can be manifested on several levels, ranging from shaky hands or wobbly knees, all the way up to uncontrollable body shakes or vomiting. In some extreme cases the nerve-struck individual can simply go catatonic, as seen in a classic case of stage-fright, where an aspiring thespian forgets his or her lines and is frozen on the stage like a deer caught in headlights.

So to combat stress, it is necessary to first understand what causes this very real physical reaction. We are all familiar with the physiology of the **Fight or Flight** syndrome found in the human condition. Under situations of extreme stress or fear, our primal survival instincts kick in and our body energizes itself with a burst of adrenalin to either run from danger or stand and fight. This is seen in the individual who exhibits almost super-human strength to lift a car off a loved one; or runs into a burning building without feeling the heat; or the mild mannered soldier who risks his own life under fire to save his buddy, squad or platoon.

This burst of adrenalin-driven energy and strength can be of great value in some sports such as power-lifting or judo, but equally detrimental to athletes who participate in precision sports such as archery or target shooting. Where the weightlifter or fighter has a physical and dynamic outlet for all this adrenalin and energy, the archer or pistol shooter is trying to remain calm and hold steady. Unfortunately, when competition stress creates adrenalin and over stimulates the nervous system, the only outlet is shaking, which in turn creates a loss of confidence and then even more stress. At times like these, probably the best remedy is to go for a run or get some vigorous exercise to burn off that nervous energy.

Since shaking and tremors are physical problems, as seen with accelerated heart rate and shallow breathing, they can often be reduced through physical means. A conditioned athlete will have superior cardio-pulmonary responses to stress, in that his or her heart and respiratory rates will remain slower and blood pressure lower. Therefore, having an active and healthy life style is an important first step in stress reduction for everyone, not just elite athletes.

Another physical symptom of nerves is indigestion, butterflies, and the feeling that one may throw-up. This again is the body's need to empty the stomach so that the blood being used for digestion can be better utilized by the muscles to **Fight or Flee** from perceived danger. Therefore heavy meals before competition are not recommended, particularly foods high in fat and protein which can be difficult to digest. In addition, food or drinks that contain caffeine or excessive sugar are not going to help the situation unless you are an endurance athlete or long distance runner.

However, not eating is also a problem causing lack of energy, weakness, loss of concentration, and may also manifest in a case of the shakes. Reasonable amounts of bland foods and carbohydrates, such as oatmeal, are excellent in the morning or prior to competition, and may absorb some of the gastric acids and help settle the stomach. Several light snacks during the day, such as bananas or even a PBJ, along with adequate hydration, can also have beneficial effects, supplying the energy required to concentrate and compete, without overloading the digestive system.

Now we get to the more complex psychological or mental aspects of stress control. As humans, we frequently play mind games with each other, **but the ones we play on ourselves can be the most destructive**. For some reason people persist in dwelling on and wrestling with the problems of everyday life without actively working to solve these problems. We hate our job but we don't quit. We are in a destructive relationship but we don't leave. Our car is unreliable but we don't get it fixed. We don't do well in competition but we don't train hard either. You get the idea....

All of these problems will continue to occupy your conscious thoughts until you correct them. For the athlete, it is critical that personal, professional and sporting lives are kept in order so as not to arrive at training, or enter a competition, with a myriad of mental distractions. From personal experience, I know that it is difficult for me to enjoy and benefit from a training session if I am neglecting work commitments. The solution is to first clear my office desk and emails, and then go to the dojo or target range with a clear and focused mindset.

There are, however, bigger problems in life such as personal tragedy, death or illness in the family, an ugly divorce, getting laid-off from work, etcetera. We often have no control over these, so must simply try to work through them. However, in many of these cases, having a healthy outlet and distraction such as physical training or judo can actually be cathartic (even though performance can be expected to suffer temporarily).

To be successful in championship level competition, one needs to be not only a problem solver but also a positive thinker. This may sound overly simplified but it is true. **You must think positively**. As the old adage goes, "If you think you can, you probably will. If you think you can't, you probably won't. But in either case you are correct!" The other quote that comes to mind is from *The Simple Art of Winning*, "We literally become what we think about most of the time."

Along with a positive attitude, confidence is an important component of stress reduction. Not the arrogant confidence of the big ego or pampered superstar, but the confidence that comes with hard training and having laid a solid foundation for the trials ahead.

Developing confidence begins with being well prepared. When you know that you are in the best possible condition, that you have **trained harder, longer and smarter** than "the other guy," then you will enter the competition arena with a level of confidence that is unmatched by less prepared competitors.

The first step towards becoming better prepared is to remove any possible excuses that you may be able to conjure up for not performing well. These cover the full gambit from personal fitness and finances to equipment and training. The solution:

1. Get into the best physical condition for championship judo.
2. Make a list of concerns and excuses and begin eliminating the ones that you have control over.
3. Make sure you have the best equipment you can afford. In the case of judo, this means two perfectly fitted IJF approved judogi that will just pass IJF scrutiny.
4. Make the necessary time for training and recovery.
5. Work towards getting the financial resources needed to train, travel and compete at the national and international levels.

6. Get a coach who will not only improve your technical and tactical performance but also boost your confidence.
7. Enter local and regional competitions with a realistic expectation of where you will place.
8. Expect to win in competition only if you are consistently winning in practice randori.
9. Learn to fight one fight at a time. Don't be thinking about who you may meet in the finals when you are still working your way through the preliminary elimination rounds.
10. Think of every competition as a learning experience and the opportunity to give your best. You don't need your best the day after; you need it on game day.

So the next subject is competition mindset – that delicate balance of confidence and focus that can be so easily disrupted by personal demons, or the words or actions of others.

I often ask my athletes, just before they step on the mat, "What are you thinking?" If the answer is, "Nothing," then it is the wrong answer. An experienced coach can see on their athlete's face exactly what they are thinking and whether their mind is in the game. Inexperienced judo players will be all over the map, but experienced competitors will be focused and determined. The jaw will be set, the eyes focused, and the posture aggressive. They will be all business, no distractions.

Drawing on the Zen of Archery, and to quote from a kyudo text, "Whether one thousand arrows or ten thousand, each one must be new." In other words, do not dwell on earlier good or bad shots, and do not think about the shots to come – only the one that is notched in the string, drawn, and ready to release. Thinking about earlier bad shots will only erode confidence, and while it is acceptable to draw confidence from a good series, this should not give a false confidence in future performance. In judo you need to stay focused and remain in the moment. You should launch each attack like it is the only attack, executed with power, commitment and confidence.

As stated earlier, the mind games that we play with ourselves can be extremely destructive. One of these is self-imposed pressure. We put pressure on ourselves to do better, score higher, impress others, or to win and make the team. Unfortunately, performance in many sports deteriorates with the harder we try. This is where one must differentiate between "trying" and "focusing." When we try harder to do something, particularly precise movements requiring fine motor skills, we are focused on the outcome and not the form. Without good form performance deteriorates which continues to create stress. This in turn makes us try harder, only resulting in additional loss in performance and more stress. Just watch a rookie golfer on the driving range. After hitting a bad ball he curses, resets his stance, grips the club tighter, concentrates on the ball harder, and swings with more force – all of which are the antithesis of a smooth, relaxed, repeatable golf swing.

This is a vicious cycle that must be interrupted by stepping back from the abyss, taking a deep breath, relaxing and returning focus to the moment and not the outcome or the win. Remember, you are fighting an opponent who also wants that gold medal, so focus on beating him or her, and erase all images of standing on the podium from your immediate consciousness. A 5-minute match is not just one start and one finish. It is a dozen *hajime-matte* periods, each requiring total focus and commitment. One lapse in concentration in any of these grip and attack periods and you are done.

On the subject of motivation – anyone who is driven to win at the national or international level is probably a very motivated individual, bordering on being an over-achiever. It takes dedication, perseverance, confidence, and determination to win, but too much determination, unsupported by

a well structured and comprehensive training program, can manifest itself as destructive stress. The important aspect of harnessing this determination is not to set unrealistic goals or make unattainable claims. For example, boastfully claiming that you will win a specific tournament only puts the proverbial *monkey on your back* and creates unneeded stress. Remember that everyone likes to see a braggart fall flat on his face, just as the crowd likes to see an underdog, or quiet and likeable individual win Gold.

At the risk of contradicting myself, it is however important to have confidence that you can win in a specific tournament. This confidence should be derived from hard training and knowing that you have been consistently beating opponents of a similar caliber. If you cannot clean the mat in randori or *shiai* at the local level, then it is unreasonable to expect great success at the Nationals. It is, however, beneficial to compete in the Nationals, do the best you can, and learn from the experience. By removing the stress of "having to win," you may in fact perform better and exceed your own expectations. When you can go to the Nationals knowing that you can win, not just thinking or hoping, and then win, then you are ready to move up to international level competition. But it makes no sense spending thousands of dollars to compete internationally if you are barely making the top ten nationally. The money would be better spent on a two-month training period in Europe or Japan, rather than being eliminated in the first round of the Grand Slam.

Lastly, it is important to surround yourself with equally positive thinking friends, teammates, and training partners. A healthy support network of non-judgmental friends and family, who will continue to love and support you whether you win or lose, can be a major asset. Just as they can share in the joy of your successes, they will be equally supportive and encouraging during the slumps, injuries, and all too frustrating training plateaus. But when it is all said and done, it is your mindset and attitude that will make or break you as a competitor. So think positively, stay focused, train with a purpose, and the gold medals will come when you have earned them.

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