

Pre -Game Jitters

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First of all it is important to remember that it's normal to feel some sense of nervousness before any contest or performance. Having said that, we can also agree that excessive nervousness or what has been called Pre-Competition Anxiety, can severely impair your performance if it gets too intense. Now, let's look at some steps to reduce unnecessary nervousness. Relaxation exercises, especially if practiced for several days or weeks before the performance or contest, can help you to reduce some of the physical feelings of tension. There are many types of relaxation exercises including progressive muscle relaxation, controlled breathing, relaxing imagery, and meditation. You can learn these relaxation exercises from a sport psychologist or from a tape or book. Sometimes, making your own relaxation tape from reading a transcript from a book can also be quite useful.

After having obtained a relaxation exercise, use it regularly at home in a quiet place (3 or more times per week) to improve your ability to relax. Then when you are feeling nervous you can use this exercise to reduce your physical arousal to some degree, but remember you should not expect that doing a relaxation exercise just before a game or performance will eliminate all of your Pre-Competition Anxiety. This is not the goal. The goal is to regulate your level of physical and emotional arousal so that you can be ready to perform at your best. For each athlete this level is different and it is up to you to experiment with different levels of arousal to find your ideal performance level.

Although relaxation can be helpful for some athletes in curbing Pre-Competition Anxiety, I have found that the most universally helpful strategy is "Going to the Well". To use this strategy we must take a closer look at what makes up Pre-Competition Anxiety. First, it is a feeling in your body that feels charged up, energized, and jittery. Second, it is a little voice in the back of your mind telling you that you are nervous, and maybe reminding you of all the things you were worried might go wrong. The important distinction here is that the physical feeling is separate from the "self talk". In "Going to the Well", we actually go to the well twice. First, we recognize that the feelings in our body are really our automatic preparation for us to perform well. So when you begin to feel the butterflies you can remind yourself "This is just my body getting ready to go out and perform at a high level". Next, we connect our physical feelings to a new set of thoughts and images, things we usually do well or have recently done well in practice or previous competitions. By focusing our mind on things we do well while feeling energized, we avoid feeling nervous and replace it with a building feeling of confidence.

So next time you start to feel your body telling you it is getting ready for the game, remember to "Go to the Well".