



How to Perform Under Pressure in Sports and in Life

by Four-time Olympian Ruben Gonzalez

Note:

This article is written from a sports point of view but these techniques will help you perform better in business, sales, making presentations, leading others, taking a test or whenever either stress and nervousness or being too loose and lackadaisical would cause you to under perform. Like other principles of success these techniques will work for anyone, anywhere, anytime. Learn these ten techniques and use them to win more.

You're in the men's start house at the top of the luge track. In 10 minutes you'll be taking your first luge run in the Olympics.

You've been training for this moment all your life and it is finally here. You're on a world stage about to race against the best athletes in the world.

There are thousands of spectators lining the track and hundreds surrounding the starting area. The spectators are not respectfully quiet like at golf or tennis tournament. Not at the Olympics. They are having a party. They are whooping, hollering and making a racket with their cow bells.

There are TV cameras everywhere. In fact there is even a cameraman about a foot away from the starting athletes. When it's your turn to start you'll have his camera right in your face.

How do you keep calm before the biggest luge run of your life? How do you stay focused on your game plan? How do you make sure your nerves don't get out of control and cause you to choke?

What do you do to insure that you will be performing at your best?

The same exact thing you did on every training run for the last four years. The same exact routine.

First of all you don't worry. Your mind is calm. You're not worried about your equipment because that has already been taken care of.

Your sled is outside in the shade so that the steel runners will remain within 4 degrees of the outside temperature and will be legal. The steels on your sled have been

prepared perfectly. You worked on them for hours last night to make them as fast as possible. Coach is watching your sled so it's OK.

You just treated your helmet's visor with an anti-fog compound so it will not fog on you during your run.

You know this track. You have trained and raced here before. You have a game plan on how you will steer through every section of every curve.

You also have contingency plans (escape routes) in case you enter any curve too early or too late. You are ready for anything the track can throw at you. No worries there.

You have done everything you could possibly do to have your best performance so now you have to simply trust yourself to do what you have trained to do.

Ten minutes before your Olympic start. The clock is ticking. You sit in the same spot you always sit on in the start house. You close your eyes and take three last runs in your mind vividly imagining exactly what you will do on a perfect run.

You are calm. You are confident. You are ready to get the job done.

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Three minutes before your start you walk outside where it's cold and loud. But you don't even hear the crowd. You are in your own world. You are calm and peaceful yet determined and ready.

You walk to a digital scale and are weighed by the officials so they can verify that you are not carrying extra weight. No problem. You already knew your weight to the ounce so the weigh in is no big deal.

You walk to the start. The luge racer that's going before you is sitting on his sled ready to start. Coach is standing behind him holding your sled. You walk next to Coach. He looks at you and nods his head. He does not say a word.

The sled in front of you starts. You've timed it perfectly so that you are out in the cold the minimum amount of time so your visor will not fog up.

Coach wipes the ice at the start with a towel to remove snowflakes which would slow you down. He lays your sled on the start and you sit on it. Coach pats you on the back twice and moves away. He doesn't say a word.

You look down at the cowling of your sled and read what you have written there - "Here I come. Smile, breathe, shoulder roll, have fun."

You close your eyes to get centered and have the hint of a smile on your face.

Why smile? Because you have done everything you could possibly do to have your best performance so now you have to simply trust yourself to do what you have trained to do. You trust yourself. You stop thinking and mentally switch gears to trusting yourself.

You open up your eyes, grip the start handles and do a couple of start motions to get the muscle memory feel. The sled feels good.

You hear an announcement - "Track is clear for Ruben Gonzalez." You hear a buzzer and the start clock starts counting down from thirty seconds to zero.

You take a couple of slow deep breaths, lower your visor, grip the start handles, and go....

Performing Under Pressure

You've worked so hard to master your sports' techniques. But what good is that if on game day you don't perform well because the pressure gets to you?

How do you insure you will perform at your peak when the chips are down? How do you manage your emotions so that you are neither too loose which would result in a sloppy performance nor too tight which would cause you to choke? How do you get yourself to that perfect level of arousal that is calm and cool yet determined and focused?

First of all you practice with the same intensity as when you are competing. You master your sport's techniques so that you feel confident on game day. Confidence doesn't come from faking it till you make it. Confidence comes from competence. And competence comes from hours and days and weeks and months and years of practice under a top coach. Practice doesn't make perfect. Perfect practice under a top coach makes perfect.

You take game day seriously. Like your life depends on it. You make sure all your gear is in place the night before. You and your coach have come up with a game plan with contingencies for unforeseen circumstances. You have visualized your game many times till you know it inside and out. You get to the place of competition early. Real early. So early that if you got a flat tire on the way to the game you would have time to change it and still make it with plenty of time.

You take some of your favorite music with you to listen on the way to the game and while you are getting ready. You made a special playlist with uplifting songs that put you in a powerful state of mind.

By doing these preliminary things you are setting yourself up for success.

Then, right before game time and during the game, you constantly do a few simple things that help you perform at your peak.

1 - Forget Your Goals on Game Day

Don't focus on the importance of the competition. Don't focus on your intended outcome. You can't control the outcome. The results will take care of themselves. Don't focus on your goals.

If you do you will only tighten up and choke.

2 - Focus on the Present

Focus on what you need to do right now. Focus on what you can control and you will be more confident. Don't focus on how good your opponent is. Don't focus on the officials. Don't focus on the crowd and the hecklers. Focus on yourself and what you can do to win.

While there are many things that can make you nervous, remember that the real cause of out of control nerves is you. You let things make you nervous. By learning to control your emotional state you will be able to perform better no matter what the circumstances.

Focus on what you need to do to perform well.

3 - Monitor Your Emotional Level

Think of your emotions as the engine revving up in a race car. One to four means you're idling. Seven means you're running fast and smooth. Eight and nine mean you're redlining. And ten means you blew your engine.

Your goal is to keep your emotions at seven. Lower if your sport is shooting or archery.

Just like a Formula One driver constantly monitors his engine, top athletes get really good at constantly monitoring their emotional level so they can be their best on the field.

Peak performers pay close attention to their tension level. You need to do the same thing. You need to start paying attention to how you feel and get to know yourself so you can detect signs that you might be getting too tight or too loose. Because when you are on either extreme you'll start making more errors in your play.

The closer you can stay to your peak emotional level the more consistently you will be able to reach your highest potential and your highest level of play.

Tight muscles, fast, short, choppy breathing and nervous sweat are signs that you are getting too stressed. You're redlining. If you start taking slow, deep, even breaths you will slowly start relaxing. Using trigger words like *calm, relax and slow down* while making a calming motion with your hands will help too.

Smiling will also help you relax. Make it fun. You can't have fun and be stressed at the same time.

Anger will make you redline and lose focus because instead of focusing on your game you are focusing on what's making you angry. Whenever you get angry you need to quickly do whatever you can to get over it and focus on your game. Say to yourself, *That's OK, I'm bigger than that, I will focus and I will win. Victory is the best revenge.*

If you have not started your event and have a few minutes, stretching your muscles, listening to your favorite music, and thinking about a time when you have excelled in the past will help you relax.

That's why it's important to arrive at the field with plenty of time. If you arrive late you will overly stressed and you won't have time to do anything about it.

If you notice that you are rushing through your motions, that could be a sign that you are over stressed. Slow down. Take a few more seconds whenever you can pause. Breathe deeply. When you do you will start relaxing and your performance will become more fluid and effective.

While it is more common to be over stressed, sometimes you can get too loose. When you are too loose you will make errors and will not care. You are getting lackadaisical. When you are too loose you need to pump yourself up. You need motivation. Pump your fist, yell, tell yourself to focus. Do something that will get your energy up because you are not racing. You are just idling.

Remember, you control the gas pedal. It's not hard. With a little practice you will develop a feel of whether you need to step on the gas or take your foot off the gas. When you start doing these things your performance will become better and more consistent.

4 - Breathe Tension Away

Taking slow deep breaths helps you relax. You will always perform better when you are relaxed because you will have better reaction time and your muscles will move more fluidly.

Sprinters are taught to run with loose hands and a loose jaw. By doing that they are able to run faster.

I take a couple of deep breaths right before I take a luge run. We are taught to exhale at the entrance and exit of every curve to stay relaxed. Believe it or not, if you don't breathe correctly on a luge run your time is about a half a second slower. In a sport that is measured to the one thousandth of a second, a half a second is an eternity.

If you play a sport that has many breaks like golf, tennis, football or baseball, deep breathing (taking a couple of slow deep breaths) needs to be a part of your in between performance routine.

World War II pilots and gunners were trained to remain relaxed and speak slowly on their intercoms. By staying relaxed the gunners were able to identify enemy planes faster and shoot more accurately.

Success Tip - Go to YouTube and look up "The Memphis Belle (1944) in Restored Color." It's a great documentary about the B-17 bomber missions. Make sure you watch the section starting at the 24:11 minute mark. That's when the bomber is being attacked by fighter planes. You can actually listen in to the gunners' radio intercom communications. It's amazing how cool, calm and collected they sound in a life and death situation.

By practicing and mastering these techniques you will be able to stay calm, cool and collected during the most stressful sports performances.

5 - Your Winning Routine

You need to come up with a routine you always do at the beginning of your performance. A routine that energizes you and puts you into the right mental and emotional state. You never deviate from your routine. It helps you relax and perform better.

Your routine could be as simple as taking a deep breath, picturing a winning moment, and focusing on your next move.

Professional athletes do this all the time. Basketball players do the same thing before shooting a free throw. Tennis players bounce the ball the same number of times before a serve. Bullfighters have the "Matador Walk." They strut around with their chest out to feel confident in the bull ring.

I start every presentation with the same four words “People always ask me...” The same sentence and the same story. Why? Because even if I’m nervous, by starting the same way, in 10 seconds I’m in my normal groove and I’m able to relax, have fun and be engaging.

6 - Use Trigger Words and Anchors

Trigger words are key words you use to remind yourself to do the things you need to do to be your best. Triggers words are like the gas pedal in a race car that cause you to respond in a precise way to your commands.

Develop a routine based on trigger words, anchors and breathing for increasing or decreasing your arousal level. When you get really good at this you will actually be able to increase or decrease your heart rate at will. Biathletes do this all the time. They need to be in a high energy mental state when they are cross country skiing and they need to calm down for the shooting portion of their competition.

We do the same thing in the luge. In the luge you need an explosive start but you need to calm down and relax when you are steering down the course.

What you say to yourself affects how you feel. How you feel affects your decisions, actions and performances. You need to direct your mind by telling it what to focus on. If you don’t control your mind your mental state will deteriorate and your performance will suffer.

As soon as you feel yourself tightening up, use words like *calm, easy, relax, slow down*.

If you feel yourself getting too loose and sloppy use words like *come on, focus, let’s go*.

Anchors are body movements that make you feel a certain way. For example, pumping your fist might make you feel powerful and in control.

When you catch yourself tightening up, smile and breathe. Smiling and deep breathing are great anchors that help melt away your tension so you can perform better.

My trigger as I’m walking up to the stage is “I’m going to have fun.”

Good performances don't happen by accident. They are the result of proper training, proper preparation and proper mental state. By controlling your mental state you can perform under pressure like you trained to perform.

7 - Dealing with Trash Talk

If your opponent tries to psych you out with trash talk ignore them. After a while they will get frustrated and will stop. When someone uses trash talk it is a sign of them being nervous about you. Just smile and don't respond. It will really bother them.

If your opponent is playing really well compliment them. Many times it will cause them to get over-confident and sloppy. They won't even realize you caused it.

Remember, when you are losing you tend to tighten up. When you are winning you tend to get too loose.

8 - Dealing with Mistakes

What you do after making a mistake or after your opponent makes a great play can set the tone for the rest of your game. Watch how you carry yourself. Walk with your head up. Keep your eyes above the horizon. Remember, if you can look up, you can get up. Focus on how you will come back. Smile and nod your head with the confidence that you will come back.

Boxers are really good at this. Whenever they get hit hard they look right at their opponent with a big smile and say, *Is that all you've got?*

When you make a bad shot or a bad move get over it. Right away. Don't let it affect your emotions. Don't get mad and berate yourself. If you do you will only tighten up and ruin your next moves.

Just say to yourself, "*That's not like me. Focus. Relax.*"

9 - Controlling Game Tempo

In sports like tennis, ping pong and racquetball you can speed up or slow down the game in between points.

If you are tight and overstressed you want to slow down the game. Take a few extra seconds to serve. Take longer to walk up to the service line when your opponent is serving. Use this time to take some slow deep breaths, focus on what you want to do, tell yourself to calm down and visualize what you want to do next.

If your opponent is stressed, mad or tight, do the opposite. Speed up the game so they can't recover.

Watch professional tennis players on TV. They do this all the time. If it's good enough for the pros, it's good enough for you.

10 - Have Fun

Having fun is the secret sauce to performing well. When you have fun you are relaxed. When you are relaxed you perform better. When you stop having fun your performance suffers. Smile. Think of your best performance. Enjoy the moment.

As I'm being introduced to speak to huge audiences and am walking to the stage I'm smiling and telling myself "Have fun. This is going to be fun."

Success Tip - YouTube "MSN Top 30 Goals Messi, Suarez, Neymar - 2014/2015." Barcelona's front line is made up of Messi (Argentina), Neymar (Brazil) and Suarez (Uruguay). They are all in their 20s, they are each the best player from their country and they have become best friends. Rather than playing selfishly trying to pad their individual stats they pass the ball to each other and genuinely celebrate each others goals. Watch them play. Watch how much they smile and laugh and how much fun they are having.

If you will have fun like them you will perform better too.

Master these Techniques

It took you a long time to master the basics of your sport. It will take time to master these techniques as well.

Learn and practice these psychological skills. Give yourself some time to get used to using these techniques so they become natural to you. Take the time to master these techniques so you can feel in control when the chips are down and so you can be your best.

Top athletes are not just good. They are consistently good. You can depend on them to perform well game after game. By mastering these techniques soon you will enjoy more consistent peak performance and you will become a better athlete.

Remember, you can use these techniques in every area of your life - at home, in the plains field, in the classroom, in the boardroom and in any high-stress situation where being cool, calm and collected will allow you to perform at your peak.

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