

# PERFORMANCE PRESSURE IN HOCKEY

By: Donna Perry, Consulting

Donna Perry Consulting  
Mental Performance Specialist  
7014 201 Street  
Langley, B.C. V2Y 2Z8  
info@donnaperryconsulting.ca  
www.donnaperryconsulting.ca



## PRESSURES FOR ELITE HOCKEY PLAYERS

The bar keeps raising and the pressure keeps increasing for young athletes in most sports, and hockey is no exception. Young boys from all over Canada are pushing harder and the expectations are growing, making it more and more difficult to achieve at high levels. Along with this rising pressure to remain competitive, is the importance of having coping skills in order to keep a mental edge. Sport represents a significant place to learn the techniques in dealing with demanding requirements and expectations. The sporting world provides an avenue to learn how to redirect focus and maintain emotional consistency, as an athlete moves toward their successes.

Unfortunately, not all athletes ride on the wave of success and sometimes face calamity, where athletes deal with pressures that create what appear like enormous obstacles. Those that do aspire have found the key ingredient to managing expectations for both themselves and others and creating their own personal realities. Never mind succumbing to what may appear to look like "pressure".

### WHAT IS PRESSURE AND HOW DO YOU EXPERIENCE IT?

Pressure is the perceived expectation of needing to perform well under challenging situations. Fear of failure and expectations are factors associated with pressure. For example, when an athlete worries about performing well for coaches, parents and trainers and fears looking silly or making mistakes in the process.

It is important to recognize that pressure is an internal thought process and one's perception of an event can greatly dictate the way the individual manages that competition. Having unusually high expectations of self and others can turn into pressure. However, it is also important to understand that pressure is not an external force caused by others.

Some athletes will do really well in

pressure-cooker situations, where as other athletes will crumble under the same pressure. Why do some athletes manage better than others? Experience plays a vital role in being able to manage and cope with pressure situations. Further, confidence and composure also have a great impact on how an athlete will manage a situation. How an athlete interprets the situation greatly affects the way they will behave or respond. The good news. It is possible to teach athletes how to manage their perceptions of situations rationally.

"You learn from experience. We don't get too high or too low". (Defenseman Christian Ehrhoff). "We don't really overreact or lose our composure at any point in the game,"



Alex Burrows

forward Alex Burrows said after the Canucks practiced yesterday. "We just stick with it. I think we got better as the year went on, sticking with the process and sticking with the 60 min. plan. If you have to take 55 or my 59min. to get it done we are willing to wait instead of forcing things. It has to do with maturity and more experience.

Fine examples of experienced athletes with confidence and composure and enjoying the process. But without the experiences, even the slightest challenges faced by some athletes can seem unmanageable. Pressure can come in many forms depending on how the athlete sees, feels or thinks about the particular scenario. Each athlete is different in how they perceive the competition. Some sources of internal pressure are:

1. Pressure to live up to expectations others have of you to succeed
2. Expectations you place on yourself to win and be successful
3. Fear that your hard work might not payoff
4. Pressure to perform well for fear of losing a spot on a team
5. Pressure to play well for fear of embarrassment in playing a poor game
6. Pressure to have a mistake free game

### INTERVENTION TIPS:

As the athlete faces pressures, some coping mechanisms will develop naturally in a response to deal with the current situation. However, over time if too many stressors build up this can create an overload and eventually lead to burnout or other stress-related symptoms. The following strategies can be implemented in training to aid in managing new and challenging experiences:

### REMAIN POSITIVE

A positive frame of mind is an essential state of being to master as an athlete.



**NAPA AUTO PARTS**  
get the good stuff!

Supplying the Clarenville Area with  
**QUALITY NAPA AUTO PARTS & ACCESSORIES**

36 Manitoba Drive, Clarenville Tel: 466-4311 Fax: 466-7316 Toll Free: 1888-304-6272

Challenge yourself to reframe the way you think and feel. Your self-talk and imagery greatly influences how you will respond in any given situation. Take for example a pre-tryout situation where you are feeling anxious and not knowing what to expect. Instead of creating scenarios in your mind of what could go wrong, consider all the things that could go right. Imagine yourself playing and performing to the best of your potential. Choose one skill that you know you do well and visualize it yourself executing it flawlessly on the ice. As well practice reframing your self-talk during that time. For example, instead of saying "I don't think I can compete against these players", reframe and say I am a solid player and have so much to offer this team.

### REFOCUS BY CALMING

An important factor in managing pressure is to find a place where you can remove yourself from the distractions of the external environment that may be causing you to feel overwhelmed and anxious. By removing yourself, you allow yourself the opportunity to regain composure, focus and clear your mind. It is important to be aware of those times when you are feeling overwhelmed by external distractions. It is also very important to believe that you have the ability to be able to control your thoughts and your actions and your response to those things in your environment.

### PRACTICE MEDITATION AND PROGRESSIVE RELAXATION

During this time, clearing your mind and finding a comfortable place to go to in your thoughts and your images will be helpful in regaining composure. Find time in your day to practice meditation. Meditation entails taking short bouts of focused time. Pick up an object and continue to focus on that object. Begin with 30 seconds and increase to 60 seconds and then increase to a minute and a half. Keep your thoughts entirely on the object. If distracting thoughts slip in, use a word such as "focus" to bring your mind back to the object and a clear state. Gradually over time you will see that your ability to be able to maintain a clear state of mind will increase.

This meditative state will allow you to focus for longer periods of time. If you think about the performance environment for hockey, the requirement is usually for on-ice players to focus and maintain their focus for periods of 30-60 seconds. So, in order to train focus we need to also train for the same period of time in which you will need to remain focused. However, we also have to consider that this focus needs to carry over into the environment that is very dynamic.

Gradually, it would be important to introduce distractions similar to what may occur in the performance environment. An athlete could try to maintain focus for 30 to 60 seconds while being distracted

by a teammate and maintaining a clear state of mind during that time. Players could challenge one another in order to see who could maintain their focus for the longest period of time while being distracted. Practically speaking, this happens everyday in training and performance, where you are surrounded by distractors. Identify what causes your distraction and learn to eliminate these distractors by focusing on your own reactions to them.

Learn a number of mental skills that you can use to help you to better relax under pressure, for example, progressive relaxation. This relaxation technique involves alternating contracting and relaxing certain muscles in the body. This technique can be used before, during and after competition. During a game, while sitting on the bench during recovery, practice relaxing and tensing muscles and taking deep breaths to rejuvenate quicker.

### PROVIDE A PERSPECTIVE

If you make competition "bigger than life" your performance will suffer. If the game is built up too much, or if that "must-win" situation becomes too important, then chances are you will not have a good game. An athlete that chokes usually has lost his/her perspective and made the competition much too important. Keep it all in perspective and have FUN while doing it!

**TAKE YOUR SKILLS TO THE NEXT LEVEL**  
WITH OVER 200 SKILL-BUILDING PRODUCTS!

**YOUR #1 SOURCE IN HOCKEY TRAINING AIDS!**

**WWW.HOCKEYSHOT.CA**  
**COUPON CODE: HSCENE11**  
SAVE \$10 OFF YOUR ORDER - valid on orders over \$100

- Hockey Goals & Targets
- Shooting Pads & Flooring Tiles
- Stickhandling & Passing Aids
- Slide Boards & Dryland
- Instructional DVDs & Books
- Coaching Products & more

**DRYLAND FLOORING TILES**

**G1 EXTREME SLIDE BOARD**

**SHOWCASING THE EXTREME PASSING KIT**

SCAN THE QR CODE WITH YOUR SMART PHONE TO VIEW VIDEO!

**HockeyShot.ca**  
**GET INTO HOCKEY TRAINING!**