

Excerpt 2: Mental Game Keys for Quarterbacks

In the following interview with Sports Psychologist Dr. Ken Ravizza, he addresses the essential mental skills for quarterback position.

How can a quarterback remain in control of his performance? For the QB, it's confidence to execute the next play. The being present orientation becomes critical.

When the QB is in control, they can think clearly enough to commit to a plan. Then they can trust what they've got. The trust element breaks down when an athlete is not committed to their plan. Instead, they want to feel great in order to trust their plan. Then they freak out because they aren't feeling great.

How do they handle it when they aren't feeling great? Have a system in place where they can focus on the task relevant performance cues. This will give them the best opportunity for success.

For example, the QB comes out of the huddle and is walking up to the line of scrimmage. He's scanning the field and taking things in, then he makes a commitment to what he's about to do. He must be totally in the present to read the defense and react. As soon as the whistle blows, he has to let go of that last play, release and get back in control of himself (whether the result was good or bad). Then, when he looks to the sideline for the play and steps into the huddle, he's all present.

How can an athlete learn to stay in the present? It's important for athletes to know the answer to questions like, "When things are going well, what am I doing?" and "When things are going poorly, what am I doing?" They can contrast the factors that happen when they are performing well, versus what happens when performance is below par.

During these times, they may have negative self-talk, focus is off, the game speeds up. I used to tell athletes, just go back to what you were doing when things were going well. But it isn't that simple. That's the trap. There are steps along the way that athletes can take to get them back to higher performance levels. When an athlete is stuck in the mud, it's hard for them to view themselves doing great. But if they can take small progressions and concentrate on the process, this becomes the athlete's armor and life jacket.

How does an athlete keep a present/process type orientation? For the QB, as he moves up to the line of scrimmage there is a gradual clicking in. Focus gets narrower as he goes in to the performance, doing the performance (executing the play) and comes out of the performance. No one is going to be fully focused all the time.

The athlete must be able to take their awareness and concentration and tie it in to the task relevant performance cues. When things are going well, athletes don't need to go to anything. They're just competing. But they have to be able to recognize the signal lights when the garbage is starting to hit the fan. The quicker athletes can catch themselves, the easier it is to get back on track. Recognition of where the heck they are performance wise is key. They have to be able to release their emotions. The QB can strap and un-strap his chin strap. This is a trigger mechanism to release the previous play and get ready for the next thing they need to do.

When the coach sees the athlete using these physical behavioral cues to release their emotions, they know the athletes are giving themselves an opportunity for success. They can see if athletes are in control of themselves or not. They can see if they are mentally 'engaged'.

They may not be able to get their performance back up to a high level immediately, but at least they are demonstrating that they have self-control. This gives them a chance to think clearly and a commit to a plan.

The mental game can be a grind. It's about learning how to get it done when you only have 60 percent of your best that day. It's about keeping the energy level and the focus in the here and now. It's so important to not worry about what you don't have and focus on what you do have and battling your rear end off to make the most of your performance that next play.

Let's say the athlete recognizes that they don't have their "A" game, besides performance cues, what else can they do to help them improve performance quickly? 1) When there are breaks in the action, they can use visualization. They can recall in their mind pitches and plays and saves that were well executed. 2) Give yourself a quick pep talk by remembering other ways you contribute to the team's success. 3) You can support your teammates verbally and you can provide insights to play their positions better. 4) Don't get obsessed with only how you are performing. Get your head out of your self-obsession and focus on others.

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