



## **Nervous Is Normal**

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One of the great myths in sports is that elite athletes don't get nervous. There they are, performing in huge stadiums on live television before worldwide audiences. They have every reason to be emotional wrecks, but they appear to be calm, collected, and totally at ease.

They are not. They get just as nervous before and during competition as the rest of us. "I get nervous," admits future Hall of Fame pitcher Greg Maddux, considered by those who watch and hit against him to be one of the coolest all of professional athletes. "But it's okay. Getting nervous is part of the game." In fact, it's so much a part of the game that coaches worry when their athletes don't get nervous before an event.

World-class athletes experience a temporary case of nerves, but they have learned how to handle their emotions in ways that don't hinder performance. In some cases, great athletes use "performance anxiety" to gain an advantage over their opponents.

### **Avoid or Panic**

Shane Murphy, Ph.D., author of *The Achievement Zone* (Putnam) and editor of *The Sport Psych Handbook* (Human Kinetics Publishers), observes two big problems associated with nerves - avoidance and panic. "Time and again I see athletes who avoid stressful situations or who panic when the pressure is on. Those who use avoidance are great practice and drill players, but are reluctant to compete. Others compete, but are not very comfortable or effective against certain athletes or teams."

Most athletes are in the group that likes to complete, but they get nervous about doing it. Murphy lists these characteristics of a nervous panic: 1) you can't remember what you are supposed to do or how to do it; 2) your mind begins to race; 3) you feel out of control; 4) you make bad decisions; or 5) you rush through a performance. The heart rate speeds up, the rate of breathing increases, and the muscles get tense.

### **Six Strategies**

Murphy teaches his clients/athletes to use one of six relaxation strategies, all of which involve specific, detailed instructions and practice sessions too comprehensive to describe here. They include:

- deep breathing (taking regular, deep breaths prior to a performance)
- relaxing muscles (reducing tension in major muscle groups by tightening, then relaxing them)
- centering (re-focusing, recovering, calming down)
- visualizing (seeing yourself perform a skill well)
- autogenic training (getting your body to respond to suggestions)
- coping affirmations (talking yourself through a stressful situation).

### **Expect It**

"The secret to dealing with nervousness is to expect it," advises Murphy. "It is very normal to get nervous in competition or when you are being evaluated during training. By practicing the relaxation strategies, you will

realize that your nervousness can help you concentrate more sharply, react faster, and give you more energy when you need it."

Murphy says that each athlete can decide which of the techniques works best for him or her. After eight weeks of training, one group of athletes was able to decrease its performance anxiety by 30 percent, while improving performance. Murphy also encourages a shortened form of deep breathing and centering for those situations during competition when there is not time to complete an entire sequence of relaxation techniques.

But Murphy's basic message is that it is normal for athletes to get nervous. Expect the jitters and prepare for them by practicing one or more of the relaxation techniques just as you practice sport-specific skills.

*Pasted from [www.athletesperformance.com](http://www.athletesperformance.com)*