PRACTICING PRESSURE SITUATIONS IN TRAINING

All athletes face pressure in sport – pressure to win, pressure to perform, pressure to have proper fitness levels, and so much more. The art of resilience and mastering one’s emotions comes from learning how to handle pressure and use it as a positive force toward higher levels of success.

An athlete’s level of personal confidence plays a critical role in handling pressure, because mastering our ability to trust our skills, which increases our confidence level, will allow us to not just survive, but thrive under pressure and win all matches, especially the close ones.

Increased confidence derives from two main sources: competence and preparedness. Competence in sports refers to one’s knowledge of rules, tactics, and techniques necessary to succeed. Preparedness in sport refers to one’s ability to execute skills, tactics, and make decisions under pressure. As a coach, I spend hours designing curriculums, practices, and periodization plans. Through intentional curriculum design, I ensure athletes within our program feel confident in their base knowledge and the “why” and “how” to execute technical and tactical skills. I strengthen the athletes sense of preparedness by incorporating weekly and daily “pressure cooker” moments into practice. These moments of intentional high-stress and challenge are meant to simulate situations where athletes must learn to rely on their developed skill set to perform at peak levels. Below you’ll find some simple steps to get you started in creating “pressure cooker” moments in your own club!

1. REDUCE FEAR

It is critical to build an environment where athletes feel safe, valued, and supported regardless of performance results. Coaches must create a safe space that includes mental, physical, and socio-emotional safety from day one. This is done by defining expectations of behavior and communication, how a team defines success, and how coaches and teammates will support and develop together over the course of the season. It is important to implement a growth mindset and goal-setting philosophy in training while encouraging athletes to reach beyond their skill level and improving errors along the way. As a coach, continue to develop your skills and incorporate mental reframing skills by asking athletes to share how a situation they are facing could be looked at from a different perspective.

2. BUILD THE TOOLBOX

As coaches, we need to prepare our athletes adequately to deal with high-pressure and high-stakes situations with the proper coping and response tools. Just as you would start a season with basic skills like stance and motion, head and hand positioning, and penetration steps, you must also start mental skills training with the basics: positivity, determination, competitiveness, persistence, critical thinking, and passion. I encourage you to start and finish your practices with short, intentional activities that reinforce positive mindset framing and reframing. Practice positive mental framing by asking athletes how they improved in training, to identify three qualities they possess that make them an asset to the team, or share five things they are grateful for. You can incorporate persistence and determination mindset training by having athletes recognize their peers’ effort and attitude in post practice shout outs. Coaches can reinforce passion while fostering a love of sport by asking athletes to share why they enjoy the sport and being a teammate. An easy way to practice critical thinking is by incorporating autonomy for athletes. Athletes who are encouraged to take ownership of themselves and their decisions tend to make better choices because they have practiced it. Another way to incorporate critical thinking is by using team building problem-solving scenarios.
3. INSTILL TRUST
Trust in sports is critical and trust-building cannot be over-emphasized. Ask athletes to self-identify what causes them stress and anxiety in competition, while acknowledging that each athlete is different and unique with their own histories and triggers. Begin to draft potential wrestling room challenge scenarios that could benefit your athletes. Try to identify three to five progressions for each challenge that would build over time based on an athlete’s positive coping skills and performance. Look at your periodization plan, curriculum, and competition schedule to see how these challenges would best fit without overloading too much stress on an athlete or the team. This plan may need to be adapted throughout the season so reflect back regularly. Once you have completed your planning phase, brief the athletes on what to expect in the pressure cooker moment and how each activity is designed to help them better achieve their goals.
Be sure to include that these challenges are just a piece of practice that will provide feedback on how athletes can continue to improve and that all athletes will be supported by their coaches and teammates throughout the whole process.

4. START SMALL
Practice room challenges that can be physical, mental, or emotional are intended to simulate competition pressure and evoke an anxiety response by inducing stress. Too much stress too soon can be inhibitive to growth causing a decrease in confidence and potentially leading athletes to drop out of the sport. Prior to any simulated competition challenges, ensure your athletes have the basic skills and competencies for their experience level.
Consider periodizing challenges by starting with non-sport specific then advancing to sport specific tasks and demand centered. Below you will find a chart providing ideas for creating challenges within your club.

5. REFLECT AND ADJUST
During your practice room stimulation challenge, coaches should observe the athletes ability to perform the task, verbal communication, and body language. Debrief each mini-simulation by asking open-ended questions that allow athletes to lead the conversation such as “Did the pressure impact your performance?” and “What went well and what could be changed in the future for better performance?” If an athlete performs poorly in the challenge, help them identify what went right and where they can improve. When an athlete performs well, encourage their success while increasing goals and expectations for next time. All athletes should remember performance under pressure is a learned skill, and a privilege. Just like any technical skill learned in wrestling, learning to handle pressure takes time, dedicated effort, and commitment. Based on an athlete’s performance, coaches should adjust future challenges to support increased mental, physical, and/or social-emotional development. Athletes who perform skills well while managing pressure can advance in the challenge progressions, whereas athletes who need more time to develop their coping skills should remain at the same level.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Non-Sport Challenges</th>
<th>Sport Specific Task Challenges</th>
<th>Sport Specific Demand Challenges</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Mental</td>
<td>Physical</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Assign a topic in advance for a public speaking activity.</strong> Add difficulty by randomizing topics before starting.</td>
<td><strong>Create uncertainty by changing rules, competition format, mat space, or scoring.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Fatigue athletes by conditioning or combat prior to issuing a technical or tactical challenge.</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Challenge your athletes to learn and demonstrate a new skill (i.e. Juggling).</strong></td>
<td><strong>Create uncertainty by removing scoreboards or countdown clocks.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Increase the length, frequency, or intensity of the challenge.</strong></td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Team</th>
<th><strong>Technique</strong></th>
<th><strong>Tactical</strong></th>
<th><strong>Evaluation</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Challenge athletes to complete improv for 5-10 min in small groups with teammates. Have athletes vote for best performance after it ends.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Create restrictions such as only being able to attack or defend with a specific technique.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Manipulate the score and time remaining to simulate competition scenarios.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Assign coach to evaluate an athlete or group during task.</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Split the team into small groups while challenging them to create and perform their own dance routine</strong></td>
<td><strong>Add complexity by requiring multiple movements together such as 2 attacks together or set up to take down to turn</strong></td>
<td><strong>Utilize the passivity clock to add complexity to a live go</strong></td>
<td><strong>Ask teammates to watch an individual complete a challenge.</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Begin a technical drill or situation in the zone</strong></td>
<td><strong>Pair athletes together who might be slightly mismatched by weight, experience, or on a specific skill</strong></td>
<td><strong>Invite family and friends to observe the training session / challenge.</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Video the challenge and have the athlete or coach evaluate post practice.</strong></td>
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REFOCUSING UNDER PRESSURE & AFTER MISTAKES

Incorporating “pressure cooker” situations into training helps prepare athletes for the uncontrollables of competition; however, those intentional situations can never 100% replicate the emotional and mental duress of a live setting. Regardless of the preparation, mistakes happen; it’s a fact of life and sport. The only thing harder than watching your athlete make a preventable mistake, is watching them sacrifice the next series of opportunities while they dwell on the one they already missed. The trick is to teach athletes how to manage emotions in the moment, adapt a short-term memory, and ultimately let go of the mistake in order to focus on the new task at hand. This is a skill that professional athletes are exceptional at and often refer to as “resetting.”

Resetting
Similar to a computer needing to reboot, resetting is a method for athletes to do a quick mental and emotional scan so as to refocus and restart after experiencing fear, stress, anxiety, and errors in competition. Successful steps for resetting are:
- Self-Awareness
- Reset Tools
- Refocusing Skills
- Put it into Action

1. SELF-AWARENESS

Awareness can be boiled down to two areas:

1. What situations are typical stressors for the athlete?
2. What signals does an athlete’s body send them when they are beginning to lose focus or become emotionally charged?

If already incorporating “pressure cooker” situations into training, (Refer to “Learning to Handle Pressure” article above) athletes should be well-equipped at identifying which situations act as triggers for them. When it comes to an athlete being able to identify when they are beginning to lose mental or emotional control, coaches should encourage athletes to incorporate full body scans into their practices and competitions.

Stress/trigger signals to look for when performing a full body scan:
- Short, heavy breathing
- Increased heart rate
- Poor body language
  - Head down
  - Slumped shoulders
  - Rounded back
- Negative self talk
  - “I suck”
  - “I am too far behind”
- Feeling a loss of control
- Irrational risk taking
- Negative responses like blaming others or making excuses

Each athlete is different so when performing these scans, athletes can begin to familiarize themselves with their body’s unique response to stress. With enough practice, athletes will be able to identify stressful situations and their body’s response to those ahead of time—enabling them to act on the situation before it gets too large to manage.

2. PHYSICAL AND MENTAL RESETS

In the moment that an athlete identifies a stress signal from their body, they can perform a physical or mental reset that sparks a shift in focus.

Physical Resets
- Control breathing by using a 4-count in and a 4-count out
- Actively tense and release muscles as a reminder of the mind-body connection
- Adjust body language to a position of strength
  - Head up
  - Proud chest
- Encourage athletes to incorporate a physical cue to support a mental reset
  - Fix a the ponytail
  - Adjust a kneepad
  - Tap the mat

Mental Resets
- Adjust self talk to be positive
  - “I have done everything right to prepare for this”
  - “I trust myself”
  - “I will control the pace”
3. REFOCUSING SKILLS

Wrestlers will make mistakes in practice, individual matches, and throughout their competition season—all of which requires refocusing. When athletes make a mistake in a competition, it is important for them to be able to identify what can be controlled in that moment and what cannot.

Mid-Match Refocusing Skills

- During live action, athletes need to draw upon to their practiced mental skills training to include awareness and mental reset tools.
- During the 30-second break, coaches can help athletes refocus by giving them:
  - 1 positive grow statement -- for example, what they are doing well and should continue
  - 1 positive grow statement -- for example, identify an area of struggle and how they can make an adjustment in their match
  - Reminding athletes to slow their breathing to a 4-count in and a 4-count out while relaxing their body and adjusting their self-talk.

4. PUT IT INTO ACTION

The only way athletes can assure that these skills will work when needed is to practice them! When incorporating “pressure cooker” situations into team practices, work with your athletes to intentionally drill:

- Awareness of their body’s response to stress
- Both mental and physical reset tools that work best for them
- Refocusing skills that help them adapt to mistakes with a short term memory

COACHES SEMINAR 1

On February 23rd Wrestle Like a Girl and British Wrestling Association hosted the first ‘This Girl Can Wrestle’ Coaches Seminar. During this session, coaches from across the world came together to better learn how to intentionally recruit and retain female athletes and leaders as well as the importance of adapting traditional in-person programming to a virtual landscape. Throughout the session this global cohort collaborated and built tools to recruit, retain, and practice virtually with their female athletes and leaders. All of these tools can be found in the ‘Toolkit’ below.

CLICK HERE FOR THE COACHES TOOLKIT
**REINFORCING SKILLS**

Learning new skills takes time and repetition. Finding ways to include additional practice of new skills throughout your training session can help your athletes acquire new skills more quickly over time. It’s also a great way to shake up the monotony of practice by using a variety of games, drills, and exercises throughout the season. Below you’ll see some ideas on how to include this week’s technique of penetration steps and lines of defense into a practice, but we encourage you and your athletes to come up with new creative ideas as well!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Warm Up / Cool Down</th>
<th>Games</th>
<th>Drilling</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stretches:</td>
<td>Freeze Tag</td>
<td>Very Speed:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Static: Lunge</td>
<td>When tagged, wrestlers must freeze in stance. To unfreeze, teammates must perform a double leg on them</td>
<td>Slow Set Up with Explosive Finish</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dynamic: Penetration Step</td>
<td>Modified Sumo Wrestling</td>
<td>Create Complexity:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dynamic: Rocking side to side lunge</td>
<td>Point for pushing opponents out of bounds or for scoring off the double.</td>
<td>Add set up to attack or add reaction of partner to the takedown finish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balance:</td>
<td>Doubles Only</td>
<td>Manipulate Resistance: Partner gives greater resistance for set up or vice versa adds resistance to finish</td>
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<tr>
<td>Single leg balance: elevated leg kicks to the front, side, and back</td>
<td>In this game we can only attack with single leg take downs, scoring a double leg takedown is worth 2 points, defending and scoring on defense is worth 1 point. First person to score 6 points wins!</td>
<td>Change Reactions: Opponent changes defensive tactics every 2-3 repetitions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Single Leg balance: High Jump + Touch Floor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Agility:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Skater Jumps</td>
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<tr>
<td>Down block Re-Attack</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shoot through legs hop over body</td>
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</tbody>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sparring / Combat</th>
<th>Strength &amp; Conditioning</th>
<th>Spotlight: Situational Starts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Manipulate Resistance:</td>
<td>Partner Double Drills</td>
<td>Must Score / Must Defend:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Easy In / Hard Out</td>
<td>Partner lightly sprawls while athlete must kneel slide to recover position</td>
<td>Partner A is down by 2 points with 30 seconds left and must score from a double leg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resistance of Partner</td>
<td>Partner puts hands on athletes’ shoulder to provide resistance while athlete drills double leg takedowns</td>
<td>Partner A is down by 4 points with 1 minute left and must score from a double feet to back</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of Time Of Go</td>
<td>Conditioning</td>
<td>Easy In / Combat Out: Light handfight for set up, but once partner shoots double, the go becomes live</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manipulate Intensity:</td>
<td>Body Weight</td>
<td>Combat In / Easy Out: Sparring hand fight for set up but once partner gets to double, the go returns to a drill</td>
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<tr>
<td>Break Time Between Goes</td>
<td>Sumo Squat Buddy Lifts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Competition Scenarios</td>
<td>Wall Sits</td>
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<tr>
<td>Create an Audience</td>
<td>Broad Jumps</td>
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**CONNECTION CORNER**

**Volunteer Within Your Community:** Not only is volunteering a great exercise for team building, it is also an opportunity to practice leadership in the community. You could ask the athletes to come up with ideas and to set up a date on their own. Try to make this a regular practice each year or month for your program.

**Attend a ‘This Girl Can Wrestle’ Special Event:** This month, This Girl Can Wrestle and the BWA will be hosting a Crossover Sports Panel. Attendees will have the ability to learn from female leaders in sport through a guided Q&A with sports-related activities. We encourage you and your club to join in!

**Promote your Athletes:** Use photos of current and former athletes to hang up around your club or post to the club’s social media accounts. Use the pictures and videos for story-telling to share your club’s history while motivating your current athletes to make the “Team Wall.”