

Competing with Cool

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- In small groups, list and discuss the benefits and drawbacks of competitive sport.
- How important is winning?
- Does it feel different to win as a team than it does to win as an individual? Explain.
- How do you cope with losing?
- What is the essence of "cool"?

Even as a kid, I had a talent for getting ticked off in competition. No occasion was too trivial for a tantrum, whether I was striking out, dropping a pass, or blowing a lay-up. In my more-reserved moments I had the decency to blame such failures on myself. But I also had a knack for discerning obscure causes that ranged from lucky curveballs and errant winds to lazy teammates and uncooperative backboards. In retrospect, it was uncanny how seldom I was at fault.

Of course, all my fuming and cursing were bad news when it came to the caliber of my play. The more upset I became at my shortcomings, the worse I performed. I swung at bad pitches, forced jump shots from well beyond my range, double-faulted ad nauseam. Distracted from the business at hand, my concentration in smithereens, I could usually count on my game to self-destruct. In short, I had no cool.

Now that I'm an adult, poise is still not my specialty. Just a few months back, a guy guarding me in basketball was hacking at my arms every time I took a shot and was climbing over my back for rebounds. After one especially nasty foul—I remember feeling to make sure my head was still attached—I shoved him to the court. He laid off me from then on, but no matter—I was so ashamed of my violence that my game was hopelessly undermined for the night.

And so it has gone my whole life. Under competitive pressure I have all the composure of an unfed Doberman. My anger gets so far out of hand that whatever skills I possess are seriously hampered. Only

recently have I begun to realize that playing with poise is essential to a top-notch performance in any sport. Poise in this regard means a sense of emotional balance. Just about all the best athletes know that harnessing the emotions can spell the difference between the mediocre and the champion, that staying unruffled in the face of adversity is as much a sign of character as it is an act of sportsmanship.

For the weekend jock as well as the pro, keeping cool in the heat of competition is more often a cultivated skill than an inborn trait. Even if you're the kind of hothead who snaps your 4 iron after a slice into the trees—so bent on excellence that you simply bear down too hard—you can still shed your reputation as a crybaby and salvage your game. Training yourself in techniques for self-control is really no sweat.

The key to keeping your feelings off your sleeve is to try stabilizing the degree to which you become aroused. The prevailing theory is that the simpler the athletic task, the more psyched you should become. For example, intense drive is conducive to producing the explosive strength called for in throwing the shot put, weight lifting, or blocking in football. But you can excel at foul shooting, golf, or archery only if you are calm enough to maintain precision, finesse, and a delicate touch. In other words, you can play well in the service of tension and anxiety—after all, nobody is immune to excitement—as long as you can set your flame at the right temperature for the sport in question.

Burning too hot in competition can lead to anger, an emotion much overrated as an incentive in sports. If you go into conniptions after muffing a ground ball, you're probably draining away energy that you'd be better off conserving for the next play. The infantile rages of John McEnroe serve as proof that a hair-trigger temper is more likely to aggravate hostility than mollify it. "We're always our own worst enemy," says Bruce Ogilvie, a leading sports psychologist and consultant to professional athletes. "Some athletes have only a marginal capacity for adapting to stress, while others cannot function without some tension and anxiety. It's important to find the arousal level appropriate for each of us."

Anger can also be a serious strategic error. By swearing or slamming your tennis racket into a fence after being aced, you're inviting opponents to exploit your deepest vulnerabilities.

My friend David often gets riled during tennis matches—always at his own expense. He tries so hard to win that he swings his racket with unnecessary force, sacrificing accuracy for power. He thus has the distinction of belting the ball into the net or over the base line harder than anyone I know. What David is doing, more or less, is known as choking.

Choking is visible evidence that your body is a slave to your mind—that, more specifically, your emotional state during competition dictates your neuromuscular actions. Let's say you're thinking too much and pushing too hard during a game. You become worried and self-conscious to the point of panic. Your left brain hemisphere shifts into overdrive for the emergency. Your pituitary gland lets loose more adrenaline than your central nervous system can

comfortably handle. Nerve impulses give your muscles scrambled instructions.

Now your body starts to conk out. Your heart thumps faster, your pores expand, your pupils dilate, your bronchial tubes tighten, your skin feels clammy. Your breathing is shallow, your mouth dry as sandpaper. Your digestive system shuts down to pump more blood into the muscles and, in so doing, touches off in your stomach the fluttering known as butterflies. Your sense of balance goes askew; your reflexes have no snap. Your jaw, neck, and back muscles knot with tension. Your arms and legs turn stiff and leaden, your movements jerky and uncoordinated.

The upshot is that you've psyched yourself out. You cannot function, concentrate, or make strategy because your judgment has become suspect. You throw to the wrong base, run for a touchdown in the wrong direction.

"Everybody chokes in the clutch," says Gary Krahenbuhl, chairman of the physical education department at Arizona State University. "Some just choke less."

Some athletes are naturally blessed with glacial equanimity. The best display of athletic self-control I ever witnessed took place about eleven years ago in an NBA play-off game. Walt Frazier of the New York Knicks was outclassing his opponent, Phil Chenier of the Baltimore Bullets. At one point, as Frazier was dribbling the ball up the court Chenier felt so stymied that he smacked him on the back of the head. Frazier never so much as flinched, much less cried foul. And, to cap it off, he went one-on-one with Chenier all through the second half, scoring on every shot. Say what you will, that man was *born* cool.

THE TRICK is to make your anger an asset. To an extent, it's really a matter of working the hydraulics of your body chemistry so that your neurotransmitters—the chemical couriers that deliver messages to your cells—behave appropriately. Ideally, exercise physiologists believe, high serotonin levels and low to moderate amounts of dopamine and adrenaline can keep you loose. "In the end," says Bruce Ogilvie, "you have no defense against getting ticked off. The key is how well and how fast you can handle your anger. You just have to program yourself to be in command of your emotions."

You can go far toward protecting yourself against stress in competition if you shoot for sensible objectives. The tennis freak who is obsessive about beating everyone in straight sets, for instance, is not only bucking for disappointment but guaranteeing failure as well. Your next step is

to identify what gets you peeved. You can free yourself from anger only after you've pinpointed its causes. Perhaps you sulk because your doubles partner hustles less than you'd like or because your handball adversary cheats. Reflect, if you will, on how you react to such anxieties. Do you ape the misbehavior, in turn hustling less or starting to cheat? Decide now how you'd like to adapt to those situations.

Another vital approach to competing with the right bearing is to acknowledge that mistakes are inevitable and educational. Your best bet for capitalizing on mistakes is to figure out exactly what went wrong and, once you've resolved not to repeat it, forget it ever happened. "Assimilate every mistake without dwelling on it," says Dr. Richard M. Suinn, head of the Colorado State University psychology department and psychologist for three 1976 U.S. Winter Olympic teams. "By all means, you should do whatever you can to get off your own back."

Fix your attention on the task you're about to carry out, not on its potential consequences. Think not about whether you're going to sink that eight-foot putt, but about how best to stroke the ball. That way, you'll do yourself the favor of playing with spontaneity. At the same time, try to screen out any peripheral thoughts. "The true champion," says Rainer Martens, physical education professor at the University of Illinois and a U.S. Olympic team consultant, "thinks only about his own performance, not about what his opponents are doing. He also comes to terms with factors he can't control, such as luck and the weather."

Let's assume that however hard you try to practice restraint your frontal lobes still pulse with primal fury during competition. One rather unorthodox technique, if only because it would seem to make you a candidate for a straitjacket, is to talk to yourself. In carrying on a dialogue while you're playing, you can also be your own coach. You can, in effect, keep yourself in perspective, almost as if viewing yourself from outside. You can give yourself technical advice and pep talks, as Billie Jean King and Jimmy Connors frequently do. Derek Harper, now playing with the Dallas Mavericks in the NBA, improved his field-goal shooting percentage by 30 percent in college after experimenting with "self-talk." All you have to do is turn your negative thoughts into positive ones.

A more conventional method for keeping your emotions in check is visualization—playing out in advance a mental scenario of how you'd like to perform. Picture yourself being as unflappable as Bjorn

Borg in a Wimbledon tie breaker. The next time you're tempted to bellyache at being called for a foot fault, the odds are exponentially better that you'll take the decision in stride. You'll be programmed to behave like a gentleman.

Progressive muscle relaxation is also good therapy for anxiety. Take a minute between innings or sets to tense each of your major muscles for five seconds, then relax, going in sequence from neck, shoulders, and arms to chest, abdomen, and legs. Thus stretched, your muscles cannot help but be more limber, putting you more at ease. This reaction is purely electrochemical—the squeezing out of calcium from your muscle fiber.

Perhaps your best safeguard is breathing regularly at all times, says Dan Landers, physical education professor at Arizona State University. He advises that you breathe evenly and deeply, though not too deeply, lest you hyperventilate and become light-headed. Do so through your diaphragm, not your chest. Such steady breathing helps pump fresh oxygen into the blood cells and body tissues for the manufacture of energy and relays shipments of revitalized blood to the brain. Arthur Ashe overcame his reputation as a "choke" in big matches after mastering breath control.

ONCE YOU find out which technique—or which combination—works best for you, you'll be prepared at last to liberate your performance potential. My last tip is this: It's perfectly okay to get angry in competition as long as you can channel your anger in the right direction.

This I discovered in a recent two-on-two basketball game. The guy I was covering drove for the basket, jumped straight into me, and clipped me in the jaw with his outstretched elbow, scoring on the shot. You can bet I was not tickled by this raw aggression. But to call an offensive foul in schoolyard basketball is to risk being branded a candy-ass. Besides, I decided retribution would be infinitely more rewarding. So I went into a fever of concentration. The next time he dribbled the ball toward me, I lunged forward, as if going for a steal. He was faked out by the move, forced to stop dribbling and clutch the ball. Then I pulled off a trick I had never done in twenty-three years of playing basketball. Like a pickpocket, I simply plucked the ball from his hands and scored on a lay-up. The guy was so flabbergasted that he quit the game and left the court with hardly a word. I guess he had no cool.

ROBERT BRODY wrote "The Thrill of the Thrust" for the July 1983 issue.