

NO SUCH THING AS Pressure

Sport psychologists and coaches talk about 'managing pressure', which makes the mistake of assuming that it exists. In fact, it is only a figment of our imagination, as Simon Hartley explains



SIMON HARTLEY

is an Accredited Performance

Sport Psychologist. He currently works with England Squash and the English Institute of Sport.

Contact Simon on
simon@be-world-class.com

One of the great secrets in sport psychology that even some professionals are unaware of is that people create pressure for themselves. The only way we can ever experience pressure is to create it in our own minds. It is a product of our imagination. If we experience pressure it is because we are projecting an imaginary view of the future. Normally, we start imagining what might happen if we do not achieve the outcome we desire. "What if I don't win?" ... "What will my parents say?" ... "What will the coach say?" ... "What will people think?" ...

" Pressure is a word that is misused in our vocabulary. When you start thinking of pressure, it's because you've started to think of failure "
Tommy Lasorda, LA Dodgers Coach

By projecting forward an image of what might happen, we may start doubting the outcome and feeling uneasy. We need to recognise that our imagination is incredibly powerful. Used positively it can help us to optimise our performance. However, we have to be aware that we also use our imagination to create trap doors for ourselves.

Even if we think other people are

putting pressure on us, we must recognise that ultimately we are the only ones capable of creating pressure. If other people have an expectation of us, it is actually our choice whether we accept that expectation or not. If I said to you that I expected you to become world number 1 in the next 12 months and win all your matches 3/0, you would probably ignore my expectation. You would think it was impossible (and I was mad). You would choose not to accept it. But you can do exactly the same if a coach, team mate, parent, partner or anyone else tells you they have an expectation of you. Expectations are also figments of the imagination, imaginary projections into the future. An expectation can never affect the trajectory of the ball or play a shot. They are not real and have no influence on us ... unless we choose to let them.

Typically, all those expectations amalgamate into a single idea: that it is your 'job' to win, to climb up the rankings, to secure prize money or sponsorship, etc. When you fail to do 'the job', you feel pressure. However, none of those things are 'the job'. It is much simpler.

Until very recently (when he retired), I had the pleasure of working with a world-class swimmer. Chris was a 100m breaststroke swimmer. He finished his career as a double Commonwealth gold medallist, Olympic finalist and the seventh fastest person in history in his event. For years he thought that his job was to win, to make the GB squad, to qualify for funding, to secure sponsorship, etc. However, we eventually figured out that his job was far simpler. As a 100m swimmer in a 50m pool his job was simply to swim two lengths of the pool as fast as he could. That was it! If he swam faster than everyone else, he would win – and the other achievements would follow inevitably. If someone swam quicker than him, they would win.

As soon as he realised this simple truth, his life became a lot easier. When he lined up on the blocks for the Commonwealth final, he was not thinking "This is the biggest day of my life", or "The world is watching", or "I don't want to let everyone down". His



mind was focused on one thing: swimming two lengths of the pool as fast as he could. In fact, in his victory interview with Sharon Davies, when he was asked what it felt like to be Commonwealth champion, his answer was, "I don't know." It would have been easy for Chris to get caught up in the 'circus' and

start focusing on the cameras, the event and the hype, rather than his real job. Every time he jumped in the water, whether it was an Olympic final or a practice time trial, he had a very simple job, over which he had complete control.

If you are trying to do an 'impossible' job or a job which you have no control over, you might imagine pressure because you will not be sure that you can do it. The job might seem 'too big'. If the job is to win a tournament, or even a match, you might doubt your ability to do that. Even a confident player will not be sure that they can do either of those jobs. But if your job is simply to keep the ball tight to the walls, to play a good length and to wait for opportunities to attack, you can be confident of your ability to 'do the job'. Consequently, you will feel no pressure.

Okay, it's quiz time.

Question 1 – Which match creates the greater pressure, the final of a major tournament or a practice match against a friend?

Answer – They create exactly the same amount of pressure: zero.

Question 2 – What is 'the job' in the final of a major tournament and how does it differ from a practice match?

Answer – The job in both situations is the same: simply to play the best game of squash you can.

Keys to 'managing pressure':

- Remember that if you experience 'pressure' it is being created by your imagination.
- If you create pressure, you can also eliminate it.
- Say 'no' to other people's expectations.
- Stick to the simple job, whatever the circumstances: just play the best game you can.