



Battling the Play-off Nerves

By Justin Johnson

USA Hockey-Minnesota District Associate Goalie Coach-in-Chief

We've all heard the horror stories, sleepless nights, loss of appetite, vomiting in the locker room, ulcers and even nervous breakdowns. Being a goaltender means joining the brotherhood of those who have fought the demons of the position and its demands since the dawn of the game. Psychologists use the terms arousal and anxiety but it's more commonly known in the goalie circles as jitters, butterflies, or just plain nerves. In this installment I'd like to shed some light on this physical and psychological phenomenon that is as familiar to goalies as the puck.

First it is important to understand having a feeling of arousal is actually a good thing. It is a signal to your body that you care about the upcoming events. In fact when it comes to performing at or near peak it is far better to experience a level of arousal than to be emotionally flat. So to spend time and energy working to eliminate arousal prior to competition is actually counterproductive.

Arousal vs Nerves

Though it may be difficult to recognize there is a slight difference between arousal and nerves. The sensation you feel prior to competition comes from the sum of what you are thinking about most. Therefore what you think about will determine the type of feeling you will have prior to competition. To help you separate a helpful dose of arousal that leads to peak performance. From the harmful overwhelmed feeling of nervousness that stifles performance, let's take a look at the type of thinking that would generate each feeling.

Arousal/ Helpful

Looking forward to competing
Excited to display skill
Anticipating playing well

Nerves/ Harmful

I hope I don't make a mistake
Our opponent is good and I don't feel ready
Am I good enough?

The majority of goalies who report having an overwhelming feeling of nervousness before and during games do so because their thoughts become consumed with trying to predict what may happen once they step on the ice. Will I be ready? Will they score? Will I play well? Who is watching? I hope I don't make a mistake. In addition to feeling nervous, they will also unintentionally be sending negative messages to their body. For example if you think to yourself "I hope I don't make a mistake" More than likely the image you see in your head when you say that, is one of you making a mistake. Although your intentions are good your body is going to follow and pay

attention to the image rather than the intention. Thus creating both a nervous feeling and a troubling message for your body to follow.

So how do you put yourself in a position to experience the type of arousal that actually sets you up for peak performances?

First and foremost pay attention to what you are thinking about prior to competition. If you feel nervous because you've been thinking about failing, then change it. Focus on a part of your game you are confident in and think about how that part will help you play well. If you feel confident in your footwork or ability to move into position, then think about all the ways you will use your footwork to stop the puck.

In addition to how you think, don't forget to tap into some of the pillars of mental toughness.

Pre-Game Nerves Checklist

Have a routine you can trust

The regular season should help you refine and develop your routine so regardless of importance of game you have comfort in consistent preparation.

Develop quality practice habits

Through quality practice habits the confidence in your ability to execute saves under pressure will increase.

Focus on what you control

Much of the mental energy goalies waste is by thinking about events they have no control over. Focus on what you can do and what you control.

By paying close attention to the type of thoughts you have prior to competition, and developing the type of habits included on the checklist. You will consistently find yourself amongst the breed of goaltenders anxiously awaiting the opportunity to display their skill and compete.

If for some reason you find yourself in a jam and need a quick fix to quell those nerves try this quick relaxation tip to settle your mind and body.

Two-to-one breathing is a great way to collect yourself prior to or during the game or when you get tossed in after the other goalie was pulled.

Breathe deep in through the NOSE to a three count.

HOLD

Then exhale through the MOUTH to a count of six.

REPEAT

For more information, contact Justin at Justin@mentaledgenow.com.