

Get Better

GET BETTER

Big game success

In big games at the end of the season, more often than not the two teams are often close competitively. In these matchups, the winner is usually the one that handles the pressure better and consistently executes their game plan.

Coaches rely on practice repetition, successful game performances and physical conditioning to prepare their players for big games. The feeling of success, mastery and fitness give players the confidence to perform in pressure-packed games.

But that's not enough. Players don't necessarily have 100% trust in their game and their team or are prepared to cope when adversity strikes. It leaves coaches puzzled and thinking, "I thought we were prepared?" It also frustrates players who often question "why can't I play like I do in practice and why can't I come up big in the big game?"

In these cases, players need to show mental and emotional toughness. I believe the mindset that most hockey players are trying to achieve in the big game is a confident, in control, focused, prepared, aggressive, and simple mindset.

Finding this "optimal state" will give players an opportunity to play at their best. However, players frequently try to do too much, play not to lose, and lack the trust in their well-learned skills.

Olympians and professional athletes have learned to not make the big game bigger than it is. Prepare as normal as possible, treat it like another game, and anticipate and prepare for any differences in venue, timing, flow and tasks that you will face.

At the same time, look at this big game as an opportunity to shine. Seize the opportunity - go for it. So many times teams become hesitant, afraid to lose. And, that is what they do - lose.

KEEP IT SIMPLE

There is a tendency to overthink things in big games and try to do everything just perfect. There has not been a championship game yet that was perfect.

When players think about not making mistakes they play hesitantly, miss opportunities, and, well, still make mistakes.

Players should focus on keeping their mind quiet and simple. There is no need to control everything and overthink it. Instead, focus on your game plan and what



Preparation, keeping things simple, handling adversity and focusing on specific goals can help players excel in big games.

you need to do to be successful. Focusing on the process is a powerful method for playing big in big games. Have process or "how to" goals that focus on how you will play - aggressive, in control, confident, fast, quick, powerful, elusive, dominating and relentless.

You can also focus on tactical goals such as driving the net, backchecking, fore-checking, being first on the puck or getting the puck deep. These kinds of "feeling" and tactical cues create a mindset of positive action versus worries about the result. This process focus will allow you to play hard, fast, and loose in pressure moments.

HANDLE ADVERSITY WELL

You will get ahead and lose the lead, or get behind and then have to comeback. This is to be expected. The victor is able to bounce back from negative things that happen in the game. The victor is resilient and does not panic. The hockey player that bounces back quickly lets the bad things go and puts the focus back on what matters - the play and performing your role.

Focus also on the "3 R's" - respond positively to a negative feeling or situation, relax by taking a few deep breathes to slow your mind, heart and breathing down and think about your situation clearly. Finally, refocus on playing your game and give yourself a chance to comeback by thinking positively and productively.

Adapted from Mental Toughness: Playing big in big games by Larry Lauer, Ph.D, Director of Coaching Education & Development at the Institute for the Study of Youth Sports at Michigan State University



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