



Inside the Zone

SPORTS PERFORMANCE GROUP, LLC

"You can't control the future but you can prepare for it" – Rob Polishook

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Performance Blocks Symptoms, Cause and Resolution

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A performance block is often referred to as the yips, a choke, a glitch, an extended slump, or even a disease! It usually rears its ugly head under pressure and seemingly completely out of the blue. Years ago, the infamous Steve Blass of the Pittsburgh Pirates even named his experiences with the yips, referring to it as the "The Monster!" In recent years, repetitive sports performance blocks have been experienced by athletes such as tennis star Ana Ivanovic (regarding her service toss) and second baseman Chuck Knoblauch (regarding his throwing) to name just a few. An athlete usually experiences the block as a trauma; complete with fear, rising blood pressure, sweaty palms, anxiety, and tension. In simple terms, it is a potentially career-ending, mentally crushing condition that causes a player to basically forget how to perform movements that were once simple and routine.

Symptoms: The physical symptoms of the yips/ choking include anxiousness, hesitation, feelings of helplessness, and fear. Unfortunately, these symptoms are all too often mistaken as the problem. Rather, they are a symptom to an underlying cause. In metaphorical terms, the yips are like a paper computer printout. Although the printed result shows flaws, that result derives from underlying problems that went into forming the document we view. Attempting to "fix" the printout will not resolve the mistakes that were made forming the draft.

Cause: Performance blocks are usually the result of on/off court stresses, fears, and trauma-like experiences that a person does not process through. The unprocessed energy from these experiences gets held in the body, either on a conscious, or more likely an unconscious level. The block may originate from emotional traumas such as embarrassment of missing an easy shot, continuous failure to perform in clutch situations, or coaches/parents/friends

offering hurtful comments. Additionally, they are also tightly tied into physical traumas such as any on /off court injuries such as concussions, broken bones, surgery, stitches or even witnessing an accident and internalizing it.

In most cases the performance block is a result of a combination of emotional and physical trauma-like experiences (injuries) that feed and build on each other. These unprocessed experiences accumulate much like balls in a bucket. Each experience represents a different size ball, depending on the severity of the incident for the person. When a new stress or reoccurring experience takes place, another ball accumulates on the pile, until finally a ball tips out and the performance block is now in the open for everyone to see. Needless to say, this adds an entirely new level of stress to the already embarrassing and mentally tenuous situation. Usually the player, fans, coaches and parents cannot understand how all of a sudden this could happen, when in reality it was building over time. Sometimes the player knows about it and tries to suppress it, while other times it remained below their conscious awareness.

What an athlete needs to know: The athlete should be made aware this "silent epidemic" is actually not at all uncommon, nor are they the only ones to face it. In fact, it is experienced by many athletes and feared by all. Because the yips is so often misunderstood by players, coaches, fans and just about everybody, it often gets attributed to a "physical problem" or the athlete being a "head case." Of course neither is true. The athlete should understand that they are not "broken," and the smooth effortless performance is still accessible in their body. Unfortunately, there is a temporary blockage, but it can be remedied. They need to rediscover what they already have inside them. Lastly, the athlete should understand

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that the performance block may have nothing to do with a sport-specific issue, but rather could be related to something entirely removed such as injuries, tragic events, separations, death of a loved one, and the like. These issues can deter an athlete from performing their best under pressure, as an athlete is a person first and a performer second.

What a coach, parent, fan, or teammate needs to know: Coaches, parents, fans and teammates should know that the athlete does not want the performance block to happen, and in fact, dreads it. They usually feel helpless, embarrassed, and in a state of humiliation. Imagine being able to do something easily - and then all of a sudden losing that skill when you wish you had it most. "Why me? What did I do? Will I ever be able to play normally again?" the athlete will often wonder in disbelief. Therefore, resolution does not include laughing at them, yelling at them, or expressing frustration at how they are hurting the team. Reactions are often misguided and further traumatizing, such as penalizing the athlete with extra repetitions of an exercise. In the professional ranks teams have even imposed fines on players struggling with performance blocks! Nor is it helpful to tell them to relax, heap on additional expectations such as, "If this continues you will not achieve a college scholarship, or make the pros." They already know this, and in fact this knowledge is probably one of the reasons they are in the midst of a repetitive sports performance block. If they could consciously change the situation, they would.

Resolution: The key in working with performance blocks is to gain an understanding of how the athlete experiences it from their firsthand, present tense perspective. This means to try and understand what their anxiety feels like, when it gets triggered, what previous

times the block has occurred, and how severe it feels. An athlete's natural coping mechanism is to ignore the block, fight it, or instinctively dissociate from it. Unfortunately they must realize that "what we resist persists" and ultimately fighting or ignoring it makes things worse. The root cause of the performance block is often held below the surface of our consciousness, just beyond our cognitive functioning. Because of this, the athlete is usually unable to cognitively unravel the things with traditional methods such as positive self-talk, coaching, or goal setting. This is one of the issues that make resolution so frustrating and mystifying. Often- times an athlete and their coaches will work harder to "fix" the situation on the surface level when in reality, all they are doing is further ingraining the neurological pathways of the block and making the athlete feel more "broken" by harping on the specific performance problem.

Helping an athlete process through previously stuck issues, injuries, and trauma-like experiences at the somatic physiological level is the key towards gaining clarity and releasing the root cause of the performance block. This is the process Dr. David Grand, Dr. Alan Goldberg, and myself have used in our work with Mackey Sasser, 17 years after he left the Major Leagues with a performance block "disease" called Macky-itis! (a sudden and lasting inability to throw the baseball back to the pitcher). After our work, Mackey said, "A 500 pound weight has been lifted off my shoulders! I'm now able to throw batting practice to my college team, thanks to these guys." There is nothing more fulfilling for an athlete than breaking beyond the clutches of a performance block and emerging stronger for it.



Rob Polishook, MA, CPC is the founder and director of Inside the Zone Sports Performance Group. As a Mental Training Coach he works with athletes and teams at the middle school, high school, national, college and professional levels. His work focuses on helping athletes and teams gain the mental edge, often the difference between winning and losing. Rob has spoken to athletes, coaches, parents both nationally at USTA, USPTA, ITA conferences and internationally conducted workshops and worked with top ranked juniors in India, Israel, Switzerland and the Czech Republic. He was awarded the 2008 USPTA - Eastern Division High School Coach of the Year award. Additionally he has published articles in national publications including USTA and USPTA publications. Rob can be contacted about his private or team consultation at 973-723-0314, rob@insidethezone.com, www.insidethezone.com.