

How Athletes Stay Calm Under Pressure: Your Breath Is Everything

By Johann Berlin CEO @ TLEX Institute

For Swiss Olympic golfer [Fabienne In-Albon](#), competing in the Olympic Games had been a life-long dream - one she'd been training for since she was just 10 years old. Here's the way she describes her big moment:

“At the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio when I walked to the first tee on the first day of competition, I was very nervous, I felt sick, and I wasn't quite sure how I would be able to hit this first tee shot as my entire body was shaking from all the nerves. I was [finally] standing there, just about to tee off, and the emotions that went through my body in that moment were overwhelming. I had to find a way of calming myself down and making sure that I could hit a good first tee shot.”

Fortunately, Fabienne had prepared for this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and knew just what to do.

A different kind of training

For world-class athletes, even the most rigorous and advanced physical training is no guarantee of success in a high-stakes competition. Unless they can tap into their full mental potential, no athlete can triumph in the moment that counts the most.

I know this first-hand from my work helping athletes and business leaders prepare for high-pressure situations. On a panel discussion I recently participated in at the [2nd World Summit on Ethics and Leadership in Sports](#) - sharing the stage with Fabienne - I was keenly reminded of just how powerful mental mastery can be.

Fabienne used breathing techniques to combat her nerves. “Suddenly I was completely in the NOW,” she said, “and it was just myself, my ball and the fairway. No spectators, no cameras, no TV, nothing - just me, myself and I. I was totally in my zone and that's how I hit one of the best shots in my life.”

Mastering the mind: Practical tools

To truly thrive in big moments requires self-mastery, whether you're an athlete or not. In the same way we cultivate our physical muscles, there are ways to

stimulate greater mental hygiene and regulation. For athletes, mastering the mind through breathing, meditation and other techniques offers clear advantages.

Dr. Emma Seppälä, Science Director of Stanford University's Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education, recently published a great [infographic explaining the scientific benefits of breathing](#). According to Dr. Seppälä, breathing practices:

- Decrease stress and regulate our body's level of cortisol, the stress hormone
- Reduce pain and the activation of pain centers in the brain
- Strengthen our ability to regulate emotions

Other experts have noted [improved sleep, faster recovery time and enhanced endurance](#) - and not just for athletes.

More than a trend

Fabienne's approach to competition isn't new, but it is gaining momentum as more high-profile athletes adopt it. NBA superstars like LeBron James, Kobe Bryant and Michael Jordan have all used meditation and other mindfulness techniques to take their play to the next level.

Olympic gold medalists Misty May-Trainor and Kerri Walsh have applied visualization and meditation to stay sharp on the volleyball court. And prior to his retirement, future baseball Hall-of-Famer Derek Jeter noted that one-hour morning meditations were a staple of his off-day routine. These athletes' success demonstrates the power of mental training, but there's also plenty of science to back it up.

Winning in the moments that matter most

Consider the story of Lionel Messi, the Argentine pro-soccer player widely regarded as one of the world's best. Argentina had never won a major tournament with Messi on the team, a fact he was constantly reminded of in the run-up to the Copa America championship against Chile.

When the time came for him to make the winning penalty kick, he shot the ball into the stands. Images of Messi, visibly crushed, defined a game that was Argentina's to lose. In what may have been the biggest moment of his career, Messi wasn't able to muster the emotional resiliency to triumph.

For athletes - or any of us who face make-or-break moments (and who doesn't?) - mastering our minds and our breath can be the difference between winning the big game and going home defeated.

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