

‘Choking’ revisited: A refreshing perspective on pressure

Janet Young

Victoria University, Australia

ABSTRACT

This article discusses literature surrounding the phenomenon known as “choking”. The article highlights the importance of a player’s cognitive assessment of a pressure situation, and also the dangers of forward thinking within a match. A look at the conception of pressure as defined by Billie Jean King, then begins to shed light on a new appraisal of pressure, and practical guidelines are offered.

Key words: Pressure, Choking, Cognitive appraisal.

Received: 15 September 2010.

Accepted: 1 November 2010.

Corresponding author: Janet Young, Victoria University, Australia.

Email:

Janet_young7@yahoo.com.au

INTRODUCTION

“When it comes to choking, the bottom line is that everyone does it ... ‘choking’ is a big part of every sport and a part of being a champion is being able to cope with it better than anyone else” (John McEnroe).

“We all choke ... no matter who you are, we just feel pressure in the heat of the moment” (Pete Sampras).

“If I won that second set I was going to win the match. But the adrenaline was high and I felt the nerves. I got tight. I was choking, totally gagging ... my second serve was usually one of my best and most reliable shot. When I choked my serve and forehand would go” (Pat Rafter).

Perception is all important. If a player believes he/she is a ‘choker’, then carrying this unflattering label can be a burden. Tennis is not the fun it could be, knowing that at critical times your game is likely to crumble under pressure. However, as the quotes above suggest, even champions are prone to ‘choking’. This provides some comfort but is there more that can be done to address pressure situations to avoid ‘choking’? In her recently published book, Billie Jean King (2008) suggests that adopting a fresh perspective on pressure itself may assist. Before reviewing this, let’s first consider what is meant by ‘choking’ and why it occurs.

What is ‘Choking’?

‘Choking’ is defined as “performance decrements under pressure circumstances” (Baumeister, 1984, p.610). It is a widely used term to denote those times when a player fails to play as they want, or is capable of doing, at key times in a match. Winning is often there for the taking only to disappear or evaporate through a player’s own failings to perform as expected or able.



Nideffer (1992) provides an explanation of ‘choking’ in his exposé on concentration. In brief, Nideffer proposes that ‘choking’ occurs when a player becomes immersed in internal thoughts and feelings at critical times rather than being focused on relevant task cues. This lack of appropriate focus leads to a deterioration in performance as illustrated in Figure 1.

Nideffer's (1992) conceptualisation of 'choking' highlights the importance of a player's cognitive assessment of a situation. Does a player feel confident or does he feel pressured? The answer to this question is important because when confident, a player is more likely to appropriately focus on the task at hand, plan appropriate strategy and effectively execute it. When feeling pressured, a player's thoughts turn inward to irrelevant cues and anxiety increases. Under these circumstances a player is prone to 'choke'.

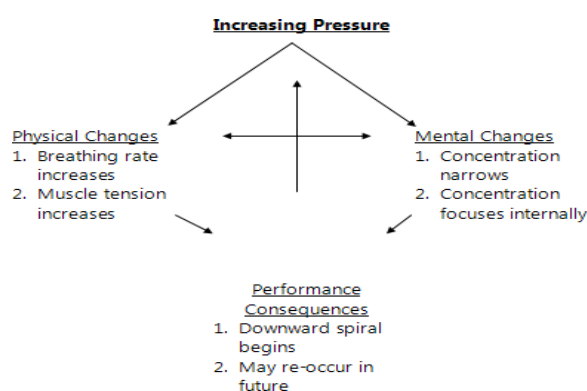


Figure 1. The Process of Choking (Nideffer, 1992. p10).

Gallway (1997) offers a similar explanation of 'choking' as provided by Nideffer (1992). According to Gallway, a player starts to feel pressured when they 'get ahead' of themselves, projecting what might happen in the future. For example, "What if I win this point, then I will lead by a set and service break and I only have to serve out the match. Or, "What if I lose this game then we have to go into a third set". This 'what if' theorising by a player can occur at any time in a match, and in instances when a player places particular importance on winning (or losing) a specific point, game or set, then 'choking' can occur.

BILLIE JEAN KING'S REFLECTIONS ON PRESSURE

Both Nideffer's (1992) and Gallway's (1997) explanations of 'choking' suggest that pressure is a debilitating factor in the 'choking' process. But what if pressure was deemed positive, would this make a difference? What if pressure was thought of as an opportunity to display one's skills and ability? What if pressure was considered a natural consequence of wanting to perform well at something that was important and meaningful to you? Would you be likely to 'choke' if you actually embraced pressure and considered pressure a privilege to experience? Well, these are certainly interesting themes and ones that Billie Jean King (2008) espouses in her book, *Pressure is a Privilege*.

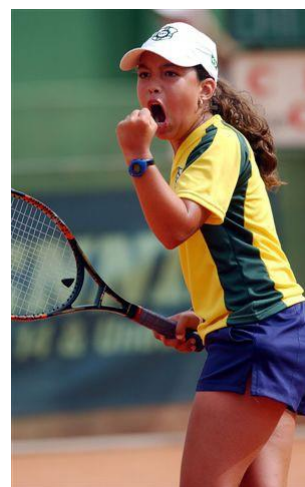
According to King, the moments of great pressure in life ... are borne out of the importance of the situation. It is a privilege to have such opportunities and so the pressures that come with

them must be seen as a privilege also. If you can see it that way, you can handle almost anything with calm and grace (p.113).

King's (2008) take on pressure was developed over many years. She recalls as a shy, young aspiring player being petrified of public speaking only to come to the realisation that to say a public 'thank you' after winning a tournament was the eventual outcome she wanted from her hard work. Indeed, the pressure of public speaking came with the privilege attached to winning! Recalling her feelings at the time of playing Bobby Riggs in the Battle of the Sexes in 1973, King (2008) described the pressure that threatened to overwhelm her. Adopting a similar attitude to the one she chose to deal with her earlier public speaking fear, King chose to embrace the pressure as "something I got to do instead of something I had to do" (p.107).

While promoting pressure as a privilege, King (2008) acknowledges that everyone handles pressure differently and it is important to "stay focused and keep from imploding" (p.109). She provides the following suggestions when individuals are faced with a stressful situation:

1. Choose to be positive and appreciate the opportunity and accompanying pressure. Remember nothing in life is easily achieved and often requires a struggle, setbacks and focused intense preparation.



2. Face the pressure head-on. Ignoring pressure will not make it go away and things are rarely as bad as they first appear
3. Ask for help from a respected friend, mentor or coach if necessary. Building a team around you can help to achieve one's goals and deal with pressure more easily than doing it alone
4. Focus on the privilege that accompanies pressure rather than the pressure per se. This focus encourages you to appreciate how lucky you are to be in a particular situation (e.g., playing a finals competition) because not everyone gets the chance

5. Develop and use a routine or ritual (e.g., a player bounces the ball twice before serving). This helps you to stay in the moment and focused

6. Attend to one's breathing taking long, slow breaths, breathing in for four counts (pushing one's stomach out) and breathing out for four counts (pulling one's stomach in). This helps to calm and relax you and possibly make you feel more secure

"CHOKING" REVISITED

So, are King's (2008) insights on pressure compatible with Nideffer's (1992) and Gallway's (1997) explanations of 'choking'? Yes they are because all authors identify the significance of a player's mental construct or interpretation of pressure. King further extends the discussion in proposing that individuals can make a choice to view pressure in a positive way. Pressure does not necessarily need to be a negative and debilitating factor but rather can be motivating, inspirational and something to be appreciated and expected.

When pressure is viewed in this light, then 'choking' is less likely to occur. No longer is a player distracted by pressure, but rather a player can put all of his/her attention on, and effort into, how to play the point at hand.

What strategy must be adopted to win the next point? How do I play this point? A player is 'in the moment', where a clear and calm mind allows he/she to focus on the point at hand and develop appropriate strategies. To this end, King provides a number of suggestions, as detailed above, for players, and others, to follow in stressful situations.

In concluding this section, it should be noted that King's (2008) advocacy of choice and pressure as a positive factor are not at odds with respected theoretical notions. Rather, these themes are compatible with theoretical underpinnings in Positive psychology (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) and Reversal theory (Kerr, 1993) for example.

CONCLUSION

If a player adopts a 'pressure is a privilege' approach, then pressure is no longer the fear that paralyses one's play. Rather, King (2008) argues pressure is a catalyst that motivates and provides an opportunity to display one's skills and abilities. It is a chance to show yourself, and others, what you are capable of, to make a difference and to learn what needs to be done to improve your game.

It could be argued that the ultimate challenge of playing the game is to be truly tested and to respond with your absolute best efforts and abilities (Gallway, 1997). Yes, it would be nice to win, but more importantly, knowing that under pressure you were able to execute and perform using all your skills, courage and concentration makes you a victor regardless of the score-line! As King (2008) suggests, the key is to embrace, thrive on, and even seek pressure. In doing so, tennis can be so rewarding and such good fun. It can be a game you play where 'choking' has little relevance because 'pressure is a privilege'.

REFERENCES

- Baumeister, R. F. (1984). Choking under pressure: Self-consciousness and paradoxical effects of incentives on skilled performance. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 46, 610-620. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.46.3.610>
- Gallway, W. T. (1974/1997). *The inner game of tennis*. Revised Edition. New York: Random House.
- Kerr, J. K. (1993). An eclectic approach to psychological interventions in sport: Reversal theory. *The Sports Psychologist*, 7, 400-418. <https://doi.org/10.1123/tsp.7.4.400>
- King, B. J. (2008). *Pressure is a Privilege. Lessons I've Learned from Life and the Battle of the Sexes*. New York: Lifetime Media, Inc.
- Nideffer, R. (1992). *Theory of Attentional and Personal Style versus Test of Attentional and Interpersonal Style*. Retrieved 7 July, 2010 from <http://www.taisdata.com/articles/tais.pdf>.
- Seligman, M. E. P., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (Eds.). (2000). Positive psychology (Special issue). *American Psychologist*, 55(1). <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.5>

RECOMMENDED ITF TENNIS ACADEMY CONTENT (CLICK BELOW)



Copyright (c) 2011 Janet Young



This text is under a [Creative Commons BY 4.0 license](#)

You are free to Share - copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format - and Adapt the content - remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially under the following terms:

Attribution: You must give appropriate credit, provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made. You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use.

[CC BY 4.0 license terms summary](#) [CC BY 4.0 license terms](#)