

Solid playoff performance is all in your head



SPORTS PSYCHOLOGY

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Playoffs are a challenge for everyone. No matter what level a player is at, post-season games have a heightened sense of importance, as they will determine where your team finishes at the end of the year.

How can a coach, parent or player make sure they go into the playoffs with a positive and 'fired up' attitude to cope with this increased pressure?

The following is a skill I work on with athletes at all levels in order to help them give their best efforts and performance during the playoffs, elimination rounds or other high pressure events.

It's known as self-talk and it's all about how you talk to yourself and how you become more aware of the way you talk to yourself.

"If you can't talk to yourself, whom can you talk to?" There's a lot of truth to this saying. Research has shown that athletes who have the ability to be aware of their 'self talk' (the messages they say to themselves before, during and after a performance), and who keep it positive, have a mental edge and it shows in their performance.

Self-talk can be positive, constructive and rational. It can also be the complete opposite: negative, counter-productive and irrational. Some players have years of negative self-talk behind them, and consistently speak negatively to themselves – in and out of sport. Like many other mental bad habits, negative self-talk reinforces fears and mistakes, and brings us down. "I feel tired ... I can't do this ... I'm gonna choke ... I'm brutal today and can't do a thing on the ice ..."

Many players don't respond well to the pressure placed on them in big games. Mental skills can be learned at a very young age to help take off some of this pressure, and positive self-talk is just one of them. Hockey Canada's Women's National Program uses mental toughness training as part of its core program, and it shows.

It's true that many top players can also be hard on themselves – especially after errors or losses – but becoming aware of the way play-

ers talk to themselves is a huge step in learning how to relax and psych themselves up during the playoffs. And some of the game's best players have the best self-talk skills.

Here's a concrete example.

Consider this "pressure cooker" statement in a player's head: "I HAVE to win this game. If we lose, we're out. I HAVE to come up with a big game today ...". It's not necessarily negative talk, but it's not focused on something concrete.

To win, players must be mentally and physically ready and willing to put in hard work and stay focused on their tasks on the ice. A player might change those thoughts to something like "I'm well-prepared, I am ready and I have the skill/determination/heart to play a great game today."

The differences between these two statements are key – one is focused on heaping more pressure on the player, and the fear of losing; the other is focused on reminding themselves of their strengths. The second statement helps athletes feel more empowered and ready to go out and show their stuff.

Self-talk is even more important after an athlete makes an error or suffers a setback in competition. The goaltender gets scored on, the forward misses an important scoring opportunity, and a defenceman gets beaten. Many players follow those errors with thoughts (and even say them out loud) like, "I'm useless. What was I doing? I let my team down!!"

This leads to a sense of hopelessness and anger focusing on the past error. A statement like "I have to win. This is our last chance" can lead to increased muscle tension, trying harder – even too hard – and making more errors. Replace these thoughts with. "I'm ok – everyone makes mistakes. I'll come back like I know I can. I'll keep my head up and play my game. It's a team sport."

These thoughts increase a sense of empowerment, optimism and focusing on the here and now, not the past error.

Self-talk won't change overnight. But being aware of it, and trying to maintain positive messages in our head, on the bench, and in the minivan ride home, can go a long way towards improving mental toughness in young players.

This year during playoffs – think positive!

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