

The Shooter's Mindset: How to Overcome Game-Time Slumps By Patrick J. Cohn, Ph.D.

Psychological momentum is very important to you or your team's performance. When you have momentum, you have high confidence to the 10th power. Momentum is massive confidence and a huge psychological advantage in any sport. However, I can argue the opposite is also true. When you struggle with your game, you lose valuable momentum. Thus, when you have momentum, you feel as if you can't do anything wrong. However, when you lose momentum and feel like you're in a mini-slump and feel as if you can't do anything right.

When you have momentum on your side, you want to ride the wave until the end of the game or it runs out. What's more difficult for athletes and teams is when they lose momentum during a game and act as if they are in a game-time drought or mini-slump. Confidence, energy, and your performance suffers in this mindset.

Many athletes experience a mini-drought during a game more than once in their career. Overcoming a "mini-slump" during the first half of a game is tough for many athletes to cope with. A golfer may miss several short putts on the front nine. A basketball player might "lose" his shot in the first half of the game. A tennis player's backhand goes south in the first set of the match. Or a field goal kicker can't make a short chip shot.

Every athlete has experienced a temporary game-time slump... How you react to these temporary performance droughts dictates your ability to change your momentum and regain your confidence. Even the top athletes experience game-time slumps. For example, pro basketball player LeBron James struggled to find his rhythm against the Milwaukee Bucks last Saturday. James missed most of his shots that night, making only 12 of 27 from the field.. And he went 15 minutes without making a single shot in the second half.

Back to your reaction... The top athletes in the world have a "shooter's mentality." If they miss early in the game, they don't allow it to shake their confidence. However, other athletes can't stand missing shots, field goals, or putts, and not performing up to their expectations. They might get frustrated, lose confidence, and stop trusting their skills. Which reaction will serve you better?

Although James missed several shots early in the game, he didn't allow missing to affect his confidence. He kept his composure. His team needed him to rally. He remained confident his shots would fall sooner or later. And behold, late in the fourth quarter he came out with a shooter's mindset, scoring eleven straight points. Cleveland won the game 97-85. After the game, he said:

"I had to be aggressive. The outside shot? It wasn't flowing tonight. We had great looks. We continued to take them, and we continued to miss them. We couldn't, in the fourth quarter, continue to not make open shots or not get into the paint. So I took it upon myself to just try and get into the lane and create for myself, create opportunities for others." ~LeBron James

LeBron James is one of many top athletes that keep shooting even when they miss early. When you have a shooter's mentality you are able to continue to trust your skills, stay calm after mistakes, and find momentum any way you can. Your confidence doesn't pop like a balloon after a missed opportunity. You know you can still hit shots; your skills did not leave you.

How do you develop a shooters mentality and overcome a game-time drought or loss of momentum? Below are four mental game strategies to help you turn it around when you get off to a slow start and need to find momentum.

1. Great shooters keep shooting. You can't turn your game around unless you keep shooting. You must have faith that your skills are not "lost" and it's a matter of time before you hit the next shot, sink a short putt, or hit that open receiver in the secondary.
2. Look for momentum-changing breaks in the game. When you're not playing your best and you've lost momentum, it's easy to look for bad breaks or bad luck, which makes matters worse because it reinforces the idea that you "don't have it today." I want you to look for good breaks, such as the puck bounces right to you in front of the goal.
3. Avoid the "I-just-don't-have-it-today-syndrome." I've had some of my best putting rounds after three-putting the first two holes. You can't throw in the towel early in the game expecting that the entire game will be a disaster. Instead, keep telling yourself "I'm going to turn my game around right now" - on every point or play.
4. Continue to trust your skills or shot. I know many athletes who miss early in a game and they tighten up and over-control their shots. They think this will help them get back on track. In most cases, this approach will not work. Now is the time to trust your skills. Avoid over-coaching yourself after making a mistake, which can make matters worse. See the shot you want and allow your (well-trained) body to react to the target.

Staying composed and letting go of errors is one mental strategy you need to regain momentum.