

Controlling Your Anxiety at the Free Throw Line

By Dr. Dan Czech, Sports Psychologist, Special for Better Basketball

Ever get nervous at the free throw line to the point where it affected your mechanics and consequently the shot? Ever feel that you have no control over the anxiety that you are feeling? Well, this article is a case study in just how stressful shooting free throws can be.

The following is a description of a basketball player who has had performance issues at the free throw line. Although he agreed to let me share his experience with you, I have changed his name and have not disclosed his school affiliation.

'Alex has been playing basketball ever since he can remember. He was the Captain and MVP on his high school varsity team and received a Division I scholarship from a powerhouse school in the southeast. He is now a sophomore in college and, as of this year, starting at the shooting guard spot. He never had any problems at the line until this year. He is still okay at practice but in games--during important times during the game--he feels nervous.'

When he is on the free throw line he starts worrying about not wanting to let the team down, feeling that they are depending on him to make the shot. He sometimes thinks the team will not like him anymore if he misses. In addition, he thinks about not looking like a "dork" in front of his girlfriend and friends who are watching.

He shoots very well in practice when there is no pressure. In fact, he shoots 100 free throws a day and usually makes 85 of them, and usually feels good about his stroke. However, during games, he starts getting nervous the minute he gets fouled and begins thinking that he is going to miss his foul shots. One time he was so nervous that he actually bounced the ball off of his foot before he shot.

After long discussions with Alex on his thoughts, feelings and experiences, as well as assessing his anxiety levels, and educating him on various psychological skills, we decided to incorporate the following pre-shot routine to help alleviate his state anxiety at the line. The essence of the routine was to help Alex maintain focus on the present... thinking one shot at a time in a positive manner. This routine can be used by anyone at any age. If you experience state anxiety at the line, talk to a professional about it. If it is overly serious, you can receive help. If it is something that you feel you can control, follow this routine. I have found that it has helped many athletes battle the physical butterflies and cognitive worry that often come to the surface.

I suggest that this routine be done before every free throw, again to help maintain focus on one shot at a time. The routine incorporates the letters CPT or Control, Plant and Trust (adapted from Ravizza, 2004).

The C stands for controlling negative thoughts and feelings. You first do this with deep breathing. As you breathe in, think of all the nervous thoughts that you have and then as you breathe out, visualize all of those worries and tense feelings leave you with the breath. As you breathe, visualize them out of your mind and body. Second, smile to show that this is a positive event and that you enjoy the challenge. Lastly, flex and relax your forearms; tensing and relaxing your muscles.

The P stands for planning a physical and mental routine. Before every free throw, develop a physical routine that you enjoy. I enjoy dribbling 3 times, spinning the ball, bending the knees and shooting. Create a physical plan that you enjoy. Also, plan your mental routine by visualizing the ball going through the hoop. See success as you look at the ball. Plan to make it!

The T stands for trusting yourself. Trusting your ability and understanding that you have talent is one of the most important aspects to your game. One way to help trust yourself is to use positive self talk. A technique that really helps deal with that is replacing non-trusting self-talk with positive trusting affirmations. Say to yourself "I can do this," "I'm money tonight," and/or "I'm in the game right now because I'm good."