



You hear it from coaches all the time. "He can do it in practice but it's different in the game".

As a coach and athlete, one of the main objectives in practice is to prepare your team or yourself for the emotional, visual and physical dynamics of the game. We have all heard the training mantra; **Practice how you play.**

So why do some athletes struggle to find consistency and ease of play once game stressors arise?

There are many factors involved in performance gaps. Players not making time in their daily lives to reflect and retool their "inside skills" is one major obstacle. Well-intended mental skill coaches overloading the athlete with tools, strategies and concepts that at times overloads their system is another. Put another way, sometimes trying to find a state of no thought by adding thought doesn't work. Finally, practice times are concerned with quantity over quality that players are not given time to practice **doing nothing** between actions.

Close the Gap from practice to game time by reflecting on the following realities:

Don't let Fine Focus override the visual system- The athlete that starts over-focusing on the target sends additional stressors to the brain to deal with and loses the ability to see more within the field of play. Game situations require players to *see more and look less* at any given external target. The elite athletes during game play are paying attention to the ball, cutoff or glove along with the surrounding space or other visual cues that help in better judgment. Concentrating harder and over-fixating on any one piece of the visual world athletes process explains many of the game setbacks we witness as coaches.

The Outside world takes control- Rather than staying committed to their calming, confident inner voice, players get distracted by the external noise and switch over to result thinking. Elite athletes stay disciplined to their routines and pre-actions no matter the game situation. This is Inside-out living that makes the outside world non-existent in terms of effecting ones mood or mindset. Athletes need to understand that their *mood* dictates what thoughts become dominant which effects stress and anxiety levels. Being aware that you are slipping into the Outside-In world is the first step in game play consistency. The poor performer allows the outside world events to dictate emotions. They have it backwards! Conversely, Inside-out players realize their mood controls external events. Put another way, experience does not create state of mind. State of mind creates experience.

The Weakness Avoidance Loop catches up- Spend more time in practice and training working on the situations that plague your game skills. If you can't throw a change-up with runners on base or have problems with slow rollers in bunt defense, then allocate more time and reps on those pieces. Don't be the player that never gets uncomfortable in the practice setting and spends way too much time on the stuff you are really good at! If Speed of Play is an issue for you then simulate more game speed situations in practice and realize that sometimes *smooth is slow and quick is too fast!*

There's no such thing as the Big Game- Training, practice, exhibition games and the championship game are all perceived to be the same in the way of effort, mood and emotional discipline. Players that have not taken the time to rehearse and manage the "downtime" in all games typically get exposed as the game continues. The pitcher between pitches, the hitter between pitches or the fielder between innings needs to use practice time to **create, refine and practice** their controllables. The controllables (ones mood, images, attention level and actions) become the anchor when game situations arise.

The WTF rule. The best game performers have it, the ones that need to bridge the gap from practice to games need to learn to live by it:

You can Wallow in the Fog or you can **Work the Fix.**

Every situation in the game (or life) has this choice. The best performers instinctively go into the Work the Fix mode when setbacks arise. Others get caught in the Fog that sometimes lasts until the end of the game.

Work? This is Fun. Newsflash. The game you are playing is just that. A game. The best performers have tremendous perspective on life and take time each day or in the middle of the game to reflect on what really matters.

Washington Nationals 3B Anthony Rendon when asked how he stays so calm in high stress at bats said:

"There's bigger things going on in the world like taking bullets for your country on the other side of the world. This (the game) should be a breeze for us".

This mindset starts in your daily life and shows up in practice eventually. Soon, the perceived pressures of the game become less as your game mood becomes your every day mood.

What if this was the Finale? How free and easy would you practice or play if it was the final time you took the practice field or were playing in a game? Reminding yourself on a daily basis of this **WTF** rule allows for the best athletes to truly be in the moment and have the proper mood and perspective that allows for a great performance.