How do you view your next performance - a challenge or a threat?

Helen Davis
Your next performance - A challenge or a threat?

Video 1: Introduction

Success in sport can be as a result of how well athletes deal psychologically with the demands of competition.

Psychology can play a big part in performance enhancement, but it can also be detrimental to performance. Have you ever gone into a competition and felt like you have lost the race before you have even started, or you felt like you didn't race or play well because the pressure has got to you?

Maybe, you have felt so nervous that you couldn't perform to your best – or - perhaps the worry of the other competitors has got the better of you?

The way we respond to competition is key. For example, are you an athlete who responds positively and sees the competition as a challenge? Or are you an athlete who responds negatively and sees the competition as a threat? The response is determined by the way that you perceive the situation.

I'm Helen Davis, and as a Consultant Sport Psychologist I work with a range of athletes and teams from various different sports to enhance performance.

A big part of my job is helping athletes to manage stress in the lead up to competitions, mentally preparing for the big day. I also help people to keep control of their emotions to benefit their performances and allow them to perform to their maximum potential.

Today, I am going to talk to you about your approach to your next upcoming performance. It really doesn't matter what level the competition or performance is at, I just want it to be an event that is personally meaningful to you.

What is your approach? – and how are you thinking about it?

The view that you take of this event is key to determining how you feel about it. And, how you feel about it may make the difference between the event, and your performance, being either successful or unsuccessful.

Over the course of my video series on BetterSportsCoach.com, I am going to discuss the importance of perception.

Here, we will explore the differences in perception of challenge and threat states.

We'll look at why, how you respond to a competition or event is so important – and how it can not only affect you emotionally, but also physiologically, which may ultimately make all the difference to your performance.
Finally, I will propose ways that you can promote your own individual challenge strategy to help you personally maximise your performance, perform to your potential and get the very best out of yourself.

So, let's get started.

**VIDEO 2: It's all about perception!**

Imagine yourself at the start of your next competitive performance: athletes are chatting nervously, excitement levels are high, individuals are waiting with anticipation, everyone is warmed up and ready to get started.

Perhaps you have been training for this moment for a long time, worked really hard, made sacrifices, and are feeling 100% ready for this moment. Or perhaps you are anxious, mixed thoughts and feelings are going through your head, you are excited and nervous at the same time.

Maybe you are very determined, you are fully focused - you really want to succeed, or you are terrified, your stress levels are high, and you can't wait for it to be over!

We all respond differently in a competitive environment, but sometimes the added element of the competition adds a whole host of factors into the mix when we compete; something that in sport is often called 'pressure'.

Sometimes, in moments of pressure, we fail to realise that the physical requirements of the task are the same as something you have done before – you may not have done it in competition, but you have done it in training or practice. This pressure causes our perception of the event to alter.

Some individuals will rise to the demands of competition and perform well, while others may wilt and perform poorly. In sport, pressure is an internal phenomenon: it comes from within you, not from the situation.

Pressure can either help you perform at your best, or it can become a stress and hurt your performance. It is important to realise that it is not the task that creates pressure, but our perception of the task.

We can respond to this pressure in different ways. Firstly, you might find you have physical symptoms to deal with, such as butterflies in your stomach, sweaty palms, tense muscles or rapid breathing.

These physical symptoms are all normal and are designed to help us out when facing a pressure situation, as our physiology is designed to help our sport performance.

Secondly, from a psychological perspective, there are two separate ways that we can respond to pressure situations, one that is good performance and one that is not good for performance.
These two different responses have been called ‘challenge’ and ‘threat’ states and research on athletes shows that when approaching a pressure situation, athletes experiencing a ‘challenge’ state perform well (in fact, it can be better than normal), yet if athletes are experiencing a ‘threat’ state, they perform poorly (this can be worse than normal).

So how you view your next competition really can make a difference between a good or a poor performance.

The Mapp for success is a good start.

**Video 3: The Mapp for Success**

The Mapp for Success provides a guide to what causes challenge and threat states. This easy to use ‘Mapp’ was designed by two applied sport psychologists¹ who based their work on a theory of challenge and threat states in athletes², which has been evidenced with athletes across the world. As you can see it is a step-by-step process. By using this diagram, it can help you get yourself into a challenge state – the optimal state for performance. I want to focus on the first four steps now – performance situation, philosophy, demands and resources.
Performance situation

The diagram begins with your performance situation – this could be your next race or big match or any other performance situations you can face in sport. If this performance situation is important to you, then a challenge or threat state can occur, as the situation is meaningful to you. If your event is not meaningful to you, then neither a challenge or threat state can occur, because the situation does not hold enough personal meaning to you to be perceived as pressure. So, it’s important to choose a situation that is personally meaningful to you.

How do you feel about it?

This is where we look at the next step – philosophy.

Philosophy

The second step in the diagram concerns your philosophy surrounding success or failure. Is your feeling one of pressure, you desperately want to be successful and failing at it will be really bad? Or is your feeling more reasoned, you want to be successful, but if you do fail, it's not so bad?

Have a think - what is your philosophy for your event?

Demands

The third step is demands. Here, the demands of the situation are processed, this is where you evaluate the uncertainty of your situation, the required effort you will have to put in, and the danger to yourself; this danger might be physical danger (it might really hurt or be painful) or danger to your self-esteem (you will feel rubbish if you lose, make an error or are unsuccessful. I am going to talk more about demands in the next video and explain how they can impact your performance in a negative way.

Resources

The fourth step –resources is comprised of three factors - self-confidence, control and achievement goals. These three factors are crucial in developing your own challenge strategy and I will discuss these in further detail in a subsequent video.
These first four steps of the map for success are really important, as the route that you take can determine whether you end up in challenge state or a threat state. If your performance situation is important to you, and your philosophy includes an overemphasis on failure, how you evaluate the demands of your situation will be distorted. If you have resources to meet the demands of your situation, a challenge state will occur. If however, your resources do not meet the demands of your situation a threat state will occur.

**Video 4: Demands and Resources**

I now want to focus on the demands and resources in the Mapp as they are key to understanding challenge and threat states.

**Demands**

Firstly, let’s take a look at demands. A ‘threat’ state is characterised by a negative mental approach where you focus on the demands of your important performance situation. This approach features three factors:

- Uncertainty
- Required effort
- Danger

The first demand that you might focus on is the uncertainty of your situation. This can be characterised by thinking about something where you don’t know the answers yet. Some examples could be thoughts such as:

- Where will I come in my race?
- What if my goggles fall off when I swim?
- What if I don’t score a goal?
- What if I don’t achieve the time my coach wants me to do?
- Will the weather affect my shots?
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These are all examples of thoughts where you don't know the answers to the question before you race or compete. An example here is when performers keep focusing on asking these questions and end up in a circular line of questioning, as they never get to the answer, because they don't know it yet! This can lead to anxiety and worry about performance.

The second demand you might focus on is the physical or psychological effort required in your performance situation. In competitive sporting environments, the requirement of effort to perform is always high. This effort might be physical effort - to complete your race or get through a match, but there also may be a psychological effort to manage your emotions on a big occasion, keeping focus can be hard work!

An example here is when a performer will be worrying about the pain they might experience during the match, or how much it will hurt at the end of the race. This too can lead to anxiety and worry about the performance.

The third demand is danger. This danger might be physical danger – some examples here could be:

- Colliding with other cyclists,
- Being hit in an open water swimming start, or
- Skidding off the track in poor weather conditions.

The danger might also by danger to your self-esteem, this might be characterised by worry about what others might think of your performance, or how you will think about yourself if you don’t perform well.

Resources

A challenge state is characterised by a positive mental approach where you focus on the resources that you have and can use in your important performance situation. The resources are your key ingredients to helping you achieve your performance potential. These are:

- self-confidence
- control
- achievement goals

Your resources are elements that help you cope with the demands of your situation.

A good way to think about demands and resources are with a set of scales. Look at these sets of scales, on one side of the scales you have 'demands' on the other side of the scales you have 'resources.'
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Demands versus Resources

If you are an athlete who is focusing on the 'demands' of your performance situation, your scales will be tipped in favour of demands, they will balance high up and your resources will be lower down. On the other hand, if you are an athlete who is focused on your resources, your scales will be tipped in favour of resources, they will balance high up and your demands (which will always be there) will be lower down.

The ‘pressure’ of competition can make it very easy to focus on demands, but the good news is, you can learn to thrive! You can face pressure positively and it’s your mental approach to that important situation that counts. One of the ways you can help yourself is to create your own challenge strategy.

Video 5: Creating your own challenge strategy

The way to get yourself into a challenge state is to enhance your resources. These resources include, self-confidence, control and achievement goals. Let’s take each one in turn and explore how you can work towards boosting them.

Self-confidence

What is self-confidence? Self-confidence is the degree of certainty that you have in your ability to be successful in a certain situation. It is one of the most powerful resources you can possess as an athlete, as your self-confidence can dictate how you perform, and athletes attribute their success in sport to it all the time.
It's important for any level of competition and we know what it feels like when we have it, yet, confidence can fluctuate, and can change often. What we do know from research in athletes is that it is one of the most important psychological factors relative to sport performance outcomes.

If you have high levels of confidence you are more likely to be able to cope with and enjoy performing under pressure, it also gives you a sense of freedom to express your abilities and talents. Generally speaking, athletes who have more self-confidence behave assertively, work harder and persist with their goals.

Goals that self-confident athletes set themselves tend to be more challenging, they are able to persist in the face of adversity and see pressure as a challenge. All these ingredients contribute to superior performance. So, how can you increase and maintain high levels of confidence? Here are some tips and techniques.

**Tips and techniques for boosting confidence**

**Self-talk**

What you say to yourself is one of the best ways to change your self-confidence. Thoughts are very powerful and can have a huge impact on our feelings and behaviour.

**Noticing**

The first step is to recognise and deal with thoughts that are preventing you from getting into the confident mind-set you are striving for. Write down some of the negative thoughts you are having, you can then move on to focus on strategies to help you think more positively.

**Looking back**

Reflect back on situations where you performed particularly well and try to re-create the thoughts and feelings that occurred prior to and during performances. Look for typical thoughts and thought patterns associated with good performances.

**Visualising**

Reliving a past experience through visualization and remembering other sensory experiences has proved a very effective technique for athletes. Athletes who are effective at visualisation can usually describe exactly what happened during the competition and what thoughts and feelings preceded, accompanied, and followed the performance.

**Self-talk log**
Keeping a daily diary or self-talk log of thoughts is an excellent tool for accurately creating awareness of self-talk. Ask yourself questions such as:

- ‘When I talk to myself, what do I say?’
- ‘How frequently am I talking to myself?’
- ‘When I perform badly, do I put myself down?’
- ‘Do I dwell on past performances?’
- ‘Do I call myself names?’
- ‘Does the content of my self-talk focus on any of these things: how I feel about myself; how others are viewing me; letting down friends or team-mates or how unlucky I am?’
- It is also important to monitor self-talk in training, not just during competitions

**Video 6: Techniques for controlling self-talk**

Using self-monitoring techniques is an essential first step in the process to producing performance-enhancing thoughts and eliminating unwanted ones. However, just monitoring thoughts is not usually enough. Paying too much attention to negative thoughts can be detrimental if they are not linked to some form of action or commitment to change. Here are a few ideas of what you can do:

1. **Thought stoppage**

   This is an effective technique for eliminating negative or counterproductive thoughts. The technique begins with an awareness of the unwanted thought or thoughts and then a trigger is used to interrupt the undesirable thought. The trigger can be a word, such as *stop!* or a physical action, such as clicking of fingers. Use your trigger consistently when negative thoughts appear and commit to making a change.

2. **Changing negative thoughts to positive thoughts**

   When you find yourself saying a negative statement, practice coupling it with a positive one immediately. Often negative thoughts happen in moments of pressure, so you might want to combine this with a relaxation technique; stop your negative thought with a trigger word, then take a deep breath.
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3. Reframing

This is the process of looking at something from a different point of view. By learning this process, reframing can help athletes to control their inner self talk in a positive self-enhancing manner. Almost any self-defeating statement or negative thought can be interpreted from a different perspective so that it can aid you, rather than hinder you. Here, you can acknowledge what is happening and decide how to use it to your best advantage.

I always say to athletes that noticing and working on your confidence is a daily process, be aware of it all the time, as it can really help you when you need it. Here are some ways to help boost your self-confidence.

Boosting your self-confidence

- 1. Seek out sources of confidence; re-living successful past experiences can be very powerful in helping to boost your confidence. Look back at old photographs, video clips, race reports, medals, finisher photos or anything that reminds you of your past successes.
- 2. Surround yourself with a support network that helps to boost your confidence- confidence is very influenced by not only what we say to ourselves, but by what others say to us. Although we cannot control what other people say to us, we can surround ourselves with important people who do boost our self-confidence; this might be by travelling to an event with someone, training with a positive partner; listen to what they say to you. Do you notice confident team mates? Notice how they talk to themselves and others.
- Remind yourself of the preparation and effort you have put in for your event- focus on what you have done, rather than what you haven’t. Pat yourself on the back for getting to the start line if it’s been a difficult or busy time leading up to your race.
- Try and look confident by sending your body a physical message of confidence by the way you stand, even if you are having difficulty feeling it. People make judgements about people depending on their body language. Research suggests that athletes who look confident are perceived more likely to be successful.
- Writing your own self-affirmation statement can boost feelings of self-confidence. Affirmations are statements that reflect positive attitudes or thoughts about oneself, stating what you want and how you want your behaviour to be, as if you already had it. Send yourself a personal, positive message of something that is happening in the present. See these statements as filling you up with confidence, belief and strength, do not allow room for doubtful or harmful thinking.
Keep practising!

It’s really important to keep practising. Over time by acting like a confident athlete, you will also start to think and feel more like a confident athlete. Psychologists call this ‘embodied cognition’ and it simply means that not only do you need to think confidently in order to act confidently, you need to act confidently in order to think confidently. By learning to think confidently your body is telling your brain that you are confident, dominant and ready to perform. Repeat your positive affirmations to yourself often and it will help you to quickly draw from it what you need, when you need it.

**Video 7: Investing time to take control**

Control is the next key ingredient for your resources, but what is control and what does it mean?

Having control is about an athlete investing time and effort into aspects of their performance that they have control over, rather than aspects they have no control over. Learning to accept that there are many factors outside your control in different performance situations is important to recognise - there is no escaping uncontrollability and unpredictability in most sports!

There are so many factors that can change without warning and keeping control of thoughts and feelings, particularly in pressured environments can be challenging.

Here are 5 ways that you can try and keep in control when approaching a pressured situation. Think about it as 5 fingers on your hand, 5 things to help you learn to focus on the ‘controllables.’

![Control diagram](image)

1. Psychological state
2. Preparation
3. Effort
4. Communication
5. If-then
If...Then plans

Setting up ‘If...then’ plans are both simple and helpful and can have a great impact on your sport performance. These plans help you prepare for potential obstacles or challenges you may face (the ‘if’) and give you direction and control to help you move forwards with a plan (the ‘then’). The ‘then’ part can involve thinking, doing or even ignoring something.

Psychological State

Always remember you are in charge of your psychological state, that is, you are in charge of what you say to yourself and when you say it. This is something that you can control using self-talk. Self-talk is about finding the right words to say to yourself at the right time.

This can help you control your attention if you find yourself focusing on ‘uncontrollables’ in a challenging performance situation, remind yourself that you have recognised there are aspects that you cannot control, but that there is no further need for you to have those thoughts now; those thoughts are not helpful to you.

Tell yourself that it is now a time for positive and helpful thinking. Positive thoughts can be triggered by key phrases that you can tell yourself to help you to perform. The idea of using trigger words or key phrases with athletes is very popular and can be highly motivational. Here, allocate words to specific thoughts, so that with a quick reminder you can tell your brain what you want it to think and feel.

Preparation

Preparation can also help you to feel a sense of control. Having a pre-performance routine can be a great way of bringing consistency and controllability to your preparation. Consistency in your approach brings many benefits as routines can foster self-confidence, develop focus on relevant behaviours and thoughts and bring the vital element of control to unpredictable situations. Remember it is you and only you who can control the thoughts and behaviours that precede your performance. The main advantage of having a routine is that if you are focusing on your routine, then you are unlikely to become distracted by external uncontrollable factors that you know are there, but which you do not need to focus on right now. If you wish for more control, be strategic in your planning. Identify key time points when you will engage in performance preparation thoughts and behaviours.
Communication

Taking control of your verbal and non-verbal communication and how you present yourself prior to a pressure event will have a big effect on your thoughts, feelings and behaviours and on those people around you. Emotions are contagious! While you cannot control what others say to you, you can take control by transmitting a message through your reactions to others of ways to cope and deal with difficult situations. By setting an example you can help others with your effective controlled communication. Evidence tells us that the way you think and feel can be determined by the way that you act. Aim to act positively and your mind and body will respond to this.

Video 8: Achievement goals – learning to focus

Achievement goals are the final ingredient for athletes wanting to achieve a challenge state. Achievement goals are all about focusing on success, what are the things that you need to do in order to perform well, particularly in the lead up to your performance?

Here, see it as directing your focus towards what you want to achieve, rather than what you want to avoid. It is where you are placing a desire and intention to execute the skills that you have control over and are confident in performing. If you are able to place your focus on what you do want to achieve, you are more likely to be view your performance situation feeling positive and challenged.

In combination with self-confidence and control, athletes who focus on achievement goals are more likely to fulfil their potential as indicated the Mapp of Success.

Having courage to approach your performance is largely about dealing with the nerves that you get when you are about to perform. How can you get past the nerves and feelings of doubt? There are a number of strategies you can use to help direct your focus to what you are wanting to achieve by involving thinking and behaving in the right way.

Here are some ways that you can help yourself to focus on success in those all-important moments leading up to an important event, performance or competition to ensure that you are reaching your potential.

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Think the right way: Avoid overthinking

You spend a lot of time practising your sport, you know it so well that it comes very naturally to you. You know how to perform and the core skills. However, when you get into a pressure situation, that all important competition, it is important to know that overthinking your skill execution can be of detriment to your performance. When you overthink the skill, you can actually disrupt the mechanics of that skill - so you end up doing things you don't want to, and you can destroy your performance in tasks that you would normally find easy.

Think Simple

Overthinking is really common; as during performance we want to make sure that we get all the small components of our performance right. However, one way to help you avoid overthinking is to simplify everything. Aim to simplify your thoughts into one single focus moments before you execute your skill. You could do this by using a word or phrase that captures what you are wanting, for example; 'long and strong' in swimming front crawl or 'knees high' in running. Give all your thoughts and actions a meaningful label that simplifies what you are wanting to achieve.

Don't say Don't

Another tip is to avoid saying ‘don’t.’ Words are important, one of the most common thing athletes say is ‘don’t mess it up’ ‘don’t fail’ however, saying that is exactly what you are wanting to avoid. When we are under pressure the brain doesn't seem to connect with the word 'don't' and we can end up doing the one thing we don't want to do! When you tell yourself not to think about something, chances are you will! When you are preparing for a big performance, and unwanted thoughts crop up in your mind, replace them with images and thoughts of what you do need to do to succeed. To make sure you do this, plan your thoughts in advance, make a note of them, practise saying them before the big day. This way, when unwanted thoughts come up, you have a plan and are ready to replace them with what you have practised.

Empty your head

If you find that you have worries and concerns in the lead up to an important event, suppressing them can lead to more worry, and could start affecting things like your sleep. If you can express these unwanted negative thoughts, you are removing the need to suppress them. To express unwanted thoughts, write them down – make a list of all your fears and all the negative consequences that you can think of. Then take some time to read through everything you have written. When you have done this, rip the paper up and throw it away. Research suggests that this can reduce unwanted thoughts and feelings of anxiety taking over in pressure situations.
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The Big First three

In those critical moments before you compete, it’s important to give your mind some really simple things to focus on. These things should be performance relevant, and potentially helpful for your performance. Having some simple images or thoughts to focus on – directly before you perform – will help you to avoid overthinking, saying ‘don’t’ phrases and any negative self-talk.

By making these thoughts and images helpful to your performance, you are more likely to enter that performance in the right mind-set to fulfil your potential. An effective way to do this is to focus on ‘the big first three’, things that you want to do in the first 3-4 minutes of your performance. These three things should be focused on doing something, rather than avoiding something. To check that your 3 things are going to be effective, write them down and then ask yourself the following questions:

1. Is each one necessary to perform well?
2. Is each one achievable early on in the performance?
3. Is each one controllable by me?
4. Is each one focused on what I want to do (as opposed to what I don’t want to do)

The aim is that you can answer yes to all 4 questions. Once you have decided on your ‘big first three’ it’s then important to commit to them with an intention to make them happy on the day when it counts.

We have now looked at all the resources you can work on to help you with planning a challenge strategy to help you get into an optimal challenge performance mind-set. We have looked at demands and how they can affect performance and how focusing on your resources can optimize performance. Let’s go back to the Mapp of Success and look at the final two steps.

Video 9: Completing the MAPP of Success

I hope that you now have an understanding of how demands and resources play an important role in performance, so I now want to move onto the rest of the Mapp for Success (see diagram again) to complete the cycle and explain what the last two steps mean.

The fifth step is the mind and body reaction step. This step is really crucial to the whole process, because your mind and body will have different reactions depending whether you have focused on your resources or the demands of your situation. Take a look at the table and see how a challenge state is better for performance (see table of body response to mental state).
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If you are an athlete who has successfully used their resources, the scales are tipped in your favour. You will experience helpful emotions and physiological reactions that define a challenge state. This includes a more efficient cardiovascular response marked by an increase in the amount of blood sent to the brain – this will help with concentration, decision-making and having control over your thoughts and emotions.

If you are an athlete who has focused on the demands of your situation, then the scales will not be tipped in your favour. Here, you will have a less efficient cardiovascular response marked by a decrease in the amount of blood sent to the brain due to constricting blood vessels – this will make decision making harder, and you will have less control over your thoughts and emotions.

The final step is the consequences step, this is a result of all the steps I have taken you through and depending which route you have taken you will either end up in challenge state or a threat state.

If you are in a challenge state, your decision making, mental processing, physical functioning and memory recall will not suffer and could be the deciding factors in your eventual success.

If you are in a threat state, your decision making, mental processing, physical functioning or emotional management will suffer, and your performance is more likely to end in failure.

An important point to remember is that you can control how you react to an important upcoming competition or performance situation by learning and developing mental skills to enhance your resources to meet the demands of your situation. By making sure that you approach important performance situations in a challenge state you can produce better performances more consistently and effectively. Good luck with your next performance, work on promoting a challenge state and you are more likely to perform better!

References


Video - Performance: A Challenge or a Threat?
Helen Davis is a Sport Psychology Consultant working towards chartered status with the British Psychological Society (BPS). Helen works with athletes, teams and coaches from a range of different sports developing mental skills to enhance performance. She has experience of working with athletes of differing ages, competing at varying levels of competition; working with elite fulltime professionals, and fitness enthusiasts.

Helen has over 25 years of experience in education as a teacher, is a sport psychologist for Swim England, Cambridge University Boat Club and TASS (Talented Athlete Scholarship Scheme) and runs her own sports psychology consultancy; think.believe.perform.

The individual is at the heart of Helen’s consultancy approach. She aims to get you thinking about you and your sport: exploring your thoughts, feelings and behaviours. She helps you to work out what you need to do to improve your performance. She can help you develop mental strategies and tools to change and improve your performance and well-being.

Some of the ways Helen could work with you:

Building confidence and self belief
Mental preparation for events

Helen is also an active, competitive Master’s and Open Water swimmer. She has competed at regional, national and international competitions. She has held National Age Group Masters Swimming titles breaststroke.
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