

The athlete's anxiety: Marin sports psychologists tackle the treatable problem of performance-inhibiting nervousness

By Jamie Goldberg

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EVEN BEFORE the first service point, tennis player Liza Cozad feels herself spiraling out of control as her body tenses up and she begins to shake. Her mind races ahead of itself as she fixates on losing and worries about what people will think. Before she has a chance to regain her focus, she is already down by a game and her nerves have taken charge. The match is slipping away and she is helpless to stop it.

For the Novato resident, winning the match has taken on much more weight than just beating her opponent. During the last 10 years, it has been a battle with her mind simply to overcome severe performance anxiety, no less play up to her potential.

"Even driving up to a tournament, I would start to get nervous," said Cozad, a former member of the United States Tennis Association Satellite Tour who still competes in USTA adult tournaments. "I would get physically nervous and then the negative talk would come in. I would say, 'Oh my God here it goes again' and I could never come out of that."

From the well-documented stories of professional athletes like baseball player Steve Sax, who suddenly became incapable of making routine throws to first base in 1983, and golfer Greg Norman, who collapsed under pressure, blowing a six-stroke lead in the final round of the 1996 Masters Tournament, to the amateur players who find themselves unable to compete in game situations, athletes at all levels can face anxiety that inhibits or even paralyzes their ability to perform.

Jeff Greenwald, a nationally recognized sport psychology consultant and author based in Corte Madera, has worked with hundreds of athletes, from youth to professional levels, who have struggled with performance anxiety. While there is no firm statistical data on such a complex and often-concealed disorder (even among top amateur and professional athletes) sports psychologists have recognized this as a pervasive problem. According to Greenwald, performance anxiety is seen across sports and is by far the top reason athletes seek his help.

A major problem for athletes is dealing with their bodies' physiological response to nerves. While most athletes recognize that some nervous tension is normal and important to performance, athletes struggling with performance anxiety worry about losing control of their nerves, preventing them from performing well.

"They're worried that they're anxious," Greenwald said. "They're not recognizing that some of these feelings are good."

While some athletes confront state anxiety, being unable to perform in certain pressure situations, such as serving a tennis ball or throwing to home plate, others face a more enduring trait anxiety, where they are affected in a range of situations. According to Greenwald, even a bad game or a series of bad games can trigger fear of another bad performance.

"There becomes an excess focus on not performing, which can become a self-fulfilling prophecy," Greenwald said. "You get stuck in having fear of the fear: you fear missing, you fear not doing well, you fear it happening again."

This type of anxiety alters the athlete's approach to the sport. Before working with Greenwald, Cozad could play at a peak performance level in practice, but found herself losing to lesser-ranked players in matches.

"I'd hit the balls out and into the net," Cozad said. "I tend to hit with a lot of pace on the ball in practice and my pace was gone. I'd be nervous that the ball was going to go out if I hit the way I wanted, so I'd take something off the ball."

Fear of public scrutiny

While the effects of performance anxiety are difficult to hide on an athletic field, where failure to execute is transparent, Greenwald said that the anxiety is often related to a broader social anxiety, where athletes are focused on the approval of others and nervous about public scrutiny.

As a competitive figure skater, Emily Ach, who worked with Greenwald to overcome her performance anxiety, was required to pass U.S. Figure Skating tests in front of a panel of judges in order to gain eligibility for higher levels. Yet, while Ach found that she could run flawless programs in practice, her legs would "turn to Jell-O" during tests and she would simply fall apart.

"So many people have put their time and energy into my skating and I didn't want to let them down," Ach said. "I'd go out there and I'd want to make it happen and in the course of that I would tighten up and get nervous that I couldn't do what I could do in practice."

According to Dave Goltz, a Larkspur based orthopedic surgeon specializing in sports medicine, a need to live up to the supposed expectations of parents or coaches can have real consequences, especially on younger athletes.

"In Marin we have a high concentration of successful high-functioning people and their children have a lot of pressure on them," Goltz said. "It's tough for a kid when they start to feel like they are not living up to expectations."

Reframe the perspective

While genetics affect a person's susceptibility to anxiety, this doesn't prevent Greenwald from successfully helping athletes. A key to his work is helping athletes reframe their perspective. For Cozad, this meant detaching herself from the sport she had played since she was five.

"I'm Liza, you might as well call me Tennis," Cozad said. "My whole self esteem, self worth, was totally tied into how I played tennis."

Athletes dealing with performance anxiety are often overly focused on the outcome, worrying about what will happen if they lose or don't meet expectations. Before working with Greenwald, Jensen Reiter, a high school senior ranked nationally by the USTA, said that his nerves would get the better of him in pressure situations.

"Outcome focus actually makes you more nervous because you're thinking about winning or losing rather than execution and playing your game," Reiter said.

In order to help athletes overcome their anxiety and get into the zone, Greenwald tries to give them the tools they need to refocus on the game situation and compete even when they are anxious.

Among these tools, breathing and visualization are keys. Now, before each match, Reiter will close his eyes and focus on his breathing while he envisions himself playing at his best, allowing him to relax and gain confidence. To practice using different techniques, Greenwald will often mimic pressure situations with the athletes.

"One time I was doing something over and over again and he kept repeating the second guessing, undermining soundtracks that would be in my head and I just had to push it aside and keep going," Ach said.

Embracing the mental side

Greenwald, a tennis player himself, who was ranked No. 1 in the world in the men's over-35 age division by the International Tennis Federation in 2002, has dealt with his own performance anxiety and believes the mental game is fundamental. While Greenwald said that many elite athletes focus on the mental game and that sports psychology is becoming more commonplace at the collegiate and professional levels, others still neglect the mental side.

"The feeling that they should have control of the mental game or that they should always perform at their peak without doing anything mentally is a simply a misperception," he said.

Yet, many athletes never seek help and some even quit if their anxiety persists. Even Ach, who finally sought out a sports psychologist and has since competed at the U.S. Adult Figure Skating Championships, said that anxiety prevented her from skating more competitively before.

"I had this history of going out there and feeling so in over my head when it came to performing like I was capable of," Ach said. "Entering something qualifying just didn't sound like fun."

According to Greenwald, however, it is unfortunate when athletes do not seek help because performance anxiety is treatable. Even when the anxiety never completely disappears, with treatment most athletes can acquire the tools to prevent their anxiety from overpowering them.

For Cozad, the improvement in her game has been evident. Although she sometimes finds herself having to refocus, she now knows how to harness her nerves.

"When I was on the court for matches I'd be so nervous I'd find myself shaking in the warm up," Cozad said. "That physically has changed for me-I don't feel the tightness, I don't feel the shakes, I don't feel nervous."