

THE PRESSURE PRINCIPLE

Under pressure you can perform fifteen percent better or worse.

—SCOTT HAMILTON

When you have fun, it changes all the pressure into pleasure.

—KEN GRIFFEY SR. and KEN GRIFFEY JR.

He was a sickly child, his growth stunted by a rare digestive disease. Kids at school called him “Peanut” and other hurtful names. A figure-skating judge said he was too small to succeed in international competition. But now here he was, on center stage, at five-foot-three, 115 pounds, the biggest attraction of the Winter Olympics. Figure skating is the main event of the Winter Games. It is rich theater, made-for-TV drama. The anticipation is delicious. For the performers the pressure is palpable. One tiny mistake—one fraction of a point deducted by unforgiving judges—can mean the difference between triumph and tears.

Scott Hamilton stood alone in the spotlight. In 1980 the American skater had finished fifth at the Games in

Lake Placid. Now, after four years of working on eliminating his weaknesses in training, after four years of waiting and dreaming, this was his chance, perhaps his last chance, to win an Olympic gold medal. Hamilton took a deep breath and launched body and soul into his routine. He glided, jumped, and spun. Arms outstretched, he became one with the music, his flashing skate blades cutting stencils in the ice.

Four minutes later it was over. Bravos filled the arena, and bouquets tossed from the stands littered the ice. The applause sounded like hard rain.

Hamilton reminded us that winners come in all sizes. Wearing a shiny gold medal that hung almost to his waist, the American Olympic champion lived his dream. That night in Sarajevo he credited his success to his mental preparedness. “Under pressure,” Hamilton said, “people can perform fifteen percent better or fifteen percent worse.”

I was among the millions of TV viewers who witnessed Hamilton’s performance that night. The skater’s comment intrigued me. All of us are performers in the game of life. We face pressure and competition every day—at work, in the boardroom, in the classroom, on the golf course, on the tennis court, the basketball court, and at play.

With Hamilton’s quote in mind, I began a new career studying the psychology of stress and the psychology of

success. My mission was to learn all I could about playing under pressure. I wanted to find out why, under pressure, some athletes break through, as Hamilton did, while others break down. In what ways, and to what extent, does the mind influence how we perform?

What is pressure? Golfer Lee Trevino said, "Pressure is when you've got thirty-five bucks riding on a four-foot putt and you've only got five dollars in your pocket." Former Pittsburgh Steelers coach Chuck Noll defined pressure as "something you feel only when you don't know what you're doing."

During the late stages of a pennant race, former Montreal pitcher Bill Lee was asked how much pressure he was feeling. Never one to duck a question, baseball's space cadet thought a moment, then announced, "Thirty-two pounds per square inch, at sea level." Charles Barkley, the former NBA star, glibly dismisses the subject, saying "Pressure is what you put in tires." But pressure is real. Pressure exists. Every athlete, whether he or she admits it, feels pressure in competition.

So where does pressure come from? Former Denver Broncos quarterback John Elway, a future NFL Hall of Famer, said he always felt the pressure to win, but most of that pressure came from within. Hockey great Mark Messier agrees: "The only pressure I'm under is the pressure I've put on myself."

The human body reacts to pressure and stress. The heart beats faster, and breathing quickens. No one is immune. Jack Nicklaus, who has won more major championships than any golfer in history, says, "Pressure creates tension, and when you're tense, you want to get your task over and done with as fast as possible. The more you hurry in golf the worse you probably will play, which leads to even heavier pressure and greater tension." Listen to tennis star Arthur Ashe: "We have a natural tendency to invest more energy when we are under pressure. But when tension rises, two things happen: the feet can't move and the diaphragm collapses. It's automatic. It's in the genetic code."

Pressure gets a bad name, but it can bring out the best in you. In fact, if you don't feel any pressure you're probably not going to do your best. Former big-league pitcher Goose Gossage thrived on pressure. "I'm not at my best," Gossage once said, "until the situation is at its worst."

I got to know Gossage when I worked with the Cubs and later the Seattle Mariners. Goose was a master at keeping his job in perspective. I remember asking him how he handled the pressure of being a closer. Gossage said, "Every time I come into a game I think of my home in the Rockies, and that relaxes me. And I tell myself the worst thing that could happen is that I'd be home fishing there tomorrow."

Hamilton dealt with pressure in another way. Sixteen years after watching him win the gold medal, I spoke with Scott when he was in Phoenix with the Stars on Ice tour. When I told him that his "fifteen percent" quote about pressure became my inspiration for writing this book the skater smiled. Hamilton said he approached his gold-medal performance in Sarajevo with "refined indifference." He had trained for years to prepare for that moment. When the spotlight came on and the music began, he let fate carry him through. The hard work was over. Now, he told himself, go out and enjoy.

Pressure can be a positive force or a negative one. A close friend, Ken Ravizza, is one of the first sports psychologists to publish a study on the experiences of athletes during their "greatest moment" in sports. He found that more than 80 percent of the athletes said they felt no fear of failure. They weren't thinking about their performance. They were immersed in the activity. They were in "the zone." The probability of achieving the outcome you want increases when you let go of the need to have it.

Go into your mental studio, which we discussed in the last section. Recall a time when you broke through, when the pressure worked *for* you. Notice what you were doing, feeling, and saying to yourself. Were you relaxed or tense? Excited or anxious? Did you fear failure or feel

a desire to win? Were you focused on the outcome or absorbed in the process?

Everything gets interpreted. Pressure is in the brain of the beholder. Learn to view pressure as a challenge to meet rather than a threat of defeat.