



WHAT IS PERFORMANCE ANXIETY AND WHERE DOES IT COME FROM?



Have you ever heard the expression “trying to fit a square peg into a round hole”? The expression has more complexity to it than you might think. The most nuanced part is that you might notice that neither the square nor the circle is wrong. They are both their own shape and serve their own purpose. The problem of course is that they are not made for each other. They are misaligned. That is the best way to understand this phenomenon in our culture known as “Performance Anxiety”. In a sports context in American culture, it is extremely prevalent and threatens to undermine almost every athlete’s ability to meet their potential. But it is fundamentally caused by a misalignment rather than an ailment or pathology of any sort.

That means that the issue of performance anxiety in sports is a result of athletes trying to do something they simply aren’t ready to do, at least not completely. An athlete can have all the right training, all the right athleticism, and all the right opportunities, but because human beings are fundamentally driven by unconscious motivations rather than conscious desires, it can be said that there are many parts of most athletes that aren’t ready for the ups and downs that high level competition inevitably dishes out. We humans hold in our unconscious all the young parts of us from our childhood that never had their fundamental needs for unconditional love and safety met as children.

These parts exist in this state because it was a traumatic experience to not have those needs met, both as a whole in our childhoods and in various individual experiences. That trauma is pervasive in American culture and it creates a multiverse of sorts within us. All these parts of us are struggling to get their needs met at once, so placing them into the arena of high levels sports flies directly in the face of what those parts of us need. Square peg, meet round hole. Performance anxiety is experienced by athletes at three different levels:

Level 1: Athletes struggle with keeping their thinking focused and positive. (Ex: High levels of self-criticism/perfectionism) This level is THOUGHT.

Level 2: They experience emotional states that are negative rather than positive in association with playing their sport. (Ex: hatred of a sport or a lack of motivation) This level is THOUGHT and FELT.

Level 3: Their physical bodies struggle to contain the internal stress-related energies. (Ex: panic, tears, heaviness, exhaustion) This level is FELT only.

Here are five thought-provoking questions to guide parents in reflecting on their child's experience with performance anxiety in youth sports:

- 1.** When your child seems anxious or overwhelmed before or during a game, what do you notice about their thinking patterns? (Consider if they are self-critical, perfectionistic, or overly focused on mistakes.)
- 2.** How does your child emotionally respond to their sport? (Do they express joy, excitement, or, conversely, dread or frustration? Are there shifts in their motivation levels over time?)
- 3.** Have you observed any physical signs of stress in your child related to sports, such as changes in sleep, appetite, energy levels, or physical tension? (For example, headaches, stomachaches, or exhaustion.)
- 4.** How do you respond when your child experiences stress or anxiety around their sports performance? (Do you offer reassurance, encourage them to push through, or perhaps inadvertently reinforce their anxiety?)
- 5.** Do you feel that your child's athletic environment is aligned with their emotional and developmental readiness? (In what ways could it be better suited to support their unique needs and growth?)

All three levels blend into one experience we call “anxiety”. And this experience is extremely prevalent in American athletes. Thankfully, there’s a way forward and out. **3A Athletics** is creating resources for Parents, Coaches, and Players to better address these experiences of

Performance Anxiety in our sports culture.

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