Just Before The Game

**Dealing with Nerves**

We’ve all experienced it. You’ve been building up for this game. In any normal game you feel fine but for this one game you feel really nervous.

Some nerves before a big game are good. Why? Because they are there for a reason: to supercharge your body, to focus the mind and to improve your alertness, all qualities that are useful for a bowler. For this reason it always makes me chuckle when I hear a bowler say “I don’t get nervous before a big game.” Actually it’s great that you get nervous.

***Some nerves before a big game are good...they are there for a reason...to supercharge your body, to focus the mind and to improve your alertness***

And this leads me to my first bowls psychology technique to combat nerves before a big game.

**Bowls Psychology Technique 1: Love It and Live It!**

Let’s give you something straight off the bat here. Try not to fight them at all. Accept them. Simply see nerves as a sign that you are ready to play.

***Try not to fight nerves at all. Accept them. They are a part of your bowls psychology***

Rather than talking to yourself in a negative way strive to enjoy the feelings you are experiencing. Put a smile on your face as your heart pounds and declare to yourself how excited you feel as your body shakes a little. When you are doing this you are putting a positive spin on what so many people believe is a negative thing. How powerful is that? And you know this is what the champions do.

Champions are champions because they have learnt to ***love*** nerves.

***Champions are champions because they have learnt to love feeling nervous***

Michael Jordan, Tiger Woods, David Beckham and the swimmer Michael Phelps are examples of champions who enjoy feeling nervous because they know their nervous feelings are a sign that they are ready to compete. They have been working their backside off for years to get themselves into position to feel nervous. And when they feel it they love it. They embrace it. They accept it, and then they go play.

***Nerves: love it, embrace it, accept it, then go play***

**Bowls Psychology Technique 2: Questions, Questions**

When you feel nervous and this leads to doubt you will make negative statements to yourself. For example:

*“I am going to mess up today”*

*“If I mess up I will look stupid.”*

As we’ve discussed in the previous chapter these statements are accompanied by pictures...mental pictures of you messing up...of you making a mistake. And these pictures drive you deeper into this feeling of nervousness...where you will experience doubt, worry and anxiety.

If nerves are accompanied by statements of doubt, confidence building is delivered by asking oneself questions:

These bowls psychology questions are very powerful. And powerful questions will make an instant profound impact on your ability to deal with pressure. Why? Because as we’ve discussed before:

***The words you use determine the pictures you see which drives your confidence and subsequently determines your performance***

When nerves are accompanied by negative statements and they remain unchecked your performances will suffer.

You must stop negative statements and start asking questions. Questions that involve exciting, upbeat, energised words combat nervousness. They unlock your potential by directing your nervous energy toward playing your best game.

***Questions unlock your potential by directing your nervous energy toward playing your best game***

What questions can you ask yourself? It’s limitless! Let’s think of some more:

“What will it look like if I dominate the game today?”

“What body language do I want to play with passion, commitment and excellence?”

“What will it feel like if I’m strong in every shot I play?”

You see it’s limitless. You can ask a question about any part of your game. The point is it gets you focusing your attention on your game rather than on your nerves; it gets you focused on playing well, rather than playing badly; and it utilises the energy your nervousness has created.

Take a few minutes now to ask yourself these questions. I bet you get a real buzz. I bet you feel good. Think about asking yourself these questions before you play. Think about how brilliantly they are going to use the energy you have flowing around your body.

***Think about how brilliantly they are going to use the energy you have flowing around your body***

Do make sure that your questions allow you to create big bold positive images because this will make you feel good and feeling good is the battle won when it comes to performing under pressure.

**Bowls Psychology Technique 3: Easy Does It**

If you’re nervous take some deep breaths. It works!

I could go into great depth here about the nervous system and the relaxation response, but why bother.

It has become common place across the world that taking a few deep breaths lowers your heart rate and relaxes your body so you can effectively prepare to play.

What I will say is that recent scientific evidence suggests that when you are under pressure the area of your brain that deals with your focus, your thinking, and your decision making switches off and that deep breathing switches it back on again.

During the Game

**Squashing ANTs**

What I will say is that recent scientific evidence suggests that when you are under pressure the area of your brain that deals with your focus, your thinking, and your decision making switches off and that deep breathing switches it back on again.

What you think on the green is vitally important.

***Every thought you think on the green counts. Every thought every second of the game impacts performance***

I’m going to repeat that because it can’t be emphasised enough.

***Every thought you think on the green counts. Every thought every second of the game impacts performance***

And many bowlers suffers from ANTs when they play. No, not the creepy crawly insect ants. What I mean are automatic negative thoughts.

A for automatic

N for negative

T for thoughts

***ANTs = Automatic Negative Thoughts***

It is difficult if not impossible to play with confidence when you think in a negative way.

***It is difficult if not impossible to play with confidence when you think in a negative way***

Everyone suffers from ANTs. This is because, if you remember from chapter 2, the brain is hardwired to be negative.

ANTs tend to get louder out on the green when you are competing.

***ANTs tend to get louder out on the green when you are competing***

ANTs kill your game. How?

Well remember that bowls is a game of thought and decision making. When you fill your brain with these negative thoughts your speed of thought slows, you become less decisive, and your awareness and anticipation suffer.

***ANTs kill your game. They fill up your brain and slow you down physically and mentally***

Have a think about a time on the green when you were thinking negatively, perhaps being critical of yourself. Think back. Were you the best you could be at that moment? Could you have made an effective decision? If the answer is no then you failed in your task to play your best for the entire match. You failed in your task to be the best team mate you could be on the day.

Perhaps worst of all ANTs will cause your brain to release the kind of chemicals that suppress your movement; your ability to execute your technique will simply disappear.

Remember, this game is about inches. ANTs eat up inches. They prevent you from playing well as an individual and as a team mate.

***ANTs eat up inches***

Have a think about your ANTs. What are they? When do you get them? What do they do to your performance?

Negative thoughts on the green must be stopped as quickly as possible. ANTs must be squashed before they are allowed to multiply, before there is an infestation of ANTs.

***ANTs must be squashed before there is an infestation of ANTs***

**Technique: SPOT STOP SHIFT**

**STOP**

Psychologists always preach that awareness is the first step in change. I couldn’t agree more and it’s fair to say that it’s a real skill to recognise when you get a little negative on the green.

But this really is the start of dealing with ANTs because to be quite honest bowlers are rarely aware of how they think on the green. Many bowlers play in a state of blissful ignorance lurching from one negative thought to the next.

***Many bowlers play in a state of blissful ignorance lurching from one negative thought to the next***

Your job is to start recognising or noticing when you think negatively.

Or as I like to say “Spot the ANT.”

This is more difficult than you may think. Largely because when you set foot on the green you are there to play bowls, not to analyse yourself. In fact some forms of analysis can be distracting (as we shall discuss in the next section.)

You can start this process away from the green. Have a think now about some of the negative thoughts you have. When do they tend to come in? There is often a pattern to your ANTs. Maybe it’s when you miss a few chances. Taking some time to think about when you have ANTs during the game can improve your awareness on the green.

**A second step is to improve your awareness in training.** Whilst this isn’t the same as playing under the pressure a match delivers it will still provide a fair reflection on when your ANTs tend to come happen. And it will allow you to improve your SPOTTING ability.

But I’m afraid at some point you will have to start improving your SPOTTING during a game itself. Go easy on yourself. You won’t SPOT all the ANTs all the time straight away. This is a skill and it will take time.

**STOP**

When you SPOT an ANT your task is then to STOP the ANT.

In other words your task is to stop your negative inner voice instantly.

Again I can’t emphasise enough how important it is to terminate negative thoughts quickly. The more ANTs you have the more you fill your brain with the wrong kind of thinking. The brain slows down, you slow down. To be a great bowler you can’t afford to slow down physically and mentally.

***To be a great bowler you can’t afford to slow down physically and mentally***

So STOP the wrong thoughts. How?

Simple! Just see a STOP sign in your mind. Or perhaps say STOP to yourself. You can scream it in your mind. STOP! You can see a big red STOP sign, the one you see on the side of a road. You need something that you can consciously see or say that will snap you back into the present moment and instantly stop the negative thought from spreading.

Just like SPOTTING the ANT, STOPPING requires practice. Spend time SPOTTING and STOPPING during training. In fact spend time practicing them in your everyday life. We all get plenty of negative thoughts a day, which provide opportunities to practice this technique.

**SHIFT**

Ok you’ve SPOTTED the ANT, you’ve STOPPED the ANT, now you have to SHIFT it.

You have to SHIFT your negative thoughts to something more positive. We need that confident thinking again.

Actually on the green you need two types of thinking:

Confident

Helpful

**Confident Thinking**

We covered confident thinking in the last chapter. But let’s discuss how we can think confidently on the green, in the moment, when it’s most critical.

**Learning to Say No**

You have to become an expert at saying no to yourself.

What do I mean? Well we have an ANT, for example “this bowler is too good today.”

You are able to SPOT it and then STOP it. Then to SHIFT the ANT you have to say “NO.”

Just as you deny the opposition space to play you have to deny the ANT room in your brain. It cannot be allowed to grow.

***You must say “NO!” You cannot allow the ANT to grow***

**Have an ‘I Can’ Mentality**

Once you’ve denied the ANT space you must immediately SHIFT into a more positive mind-set. You must become an ‘I can’ person.

“NO, I CAN....”

For example:

“NO, I CAN beat this person. I CAN get the better of him.”

“NO, WE CAN win this today.”

“NO, I CAN keep this work rate up.”

You have to deny ANTs space in your brain. You have to say “NO.” Then you have to SHIFT to the positive. You have to be an “I CAN” player.

As an “I CAN” player you release a cocktail of brain chemicals such as adrenaline, noradrenaline and dopamine that drive you toward your goals. They sustain your effort. They keep you focused. They keep the prize in mind. They keep you working hard. They manage your co-ordination with excellence. They maintain your awareness, anticipation and decision making.

***An “I CAN” player releases a cocktail of brain chemicals such as adrenaline, noradrenaline and dopamine that drive you toward your goals***

This is mental toughness. Settle for anything less and you won’t be the best you can be. You won’t be the best individual you can be.