

## 5 Ideas to Reduce Competitive Fears

The pressure to perform can trigger anxiety and fear in athletes of all ages. As a result, players may suffer from muscle tension, fatigue, butterflies, loss of coordination and narrowing of concentration. Use the following techniques to help your players regain control, so they can perform at their best.

### Techniques for controlling performance anxiety

**1. Breathe deeply.** Advise your athletes to take slow, deep breaths. This serves several purposes. First, deep breaths reduce heart rate and muscle tension. Second, muscles can't function effectively without adequate oxygen, so taking deep breaths allows the muscles to perform properly.

**2. Counter irrational thinking.** To help players counter irrational thinking during a game, it's important to be aware of their thoughts. This awareness is especially critical in pressure situations. Instead, provide a rational perspective for their distorted perceptions.

**3. Increase familiarity.** Athletes can become anxious in unfamiliar settings. That's why playing at "home" is such an advantage. Players typically perform better when they're comfortable with their surroundings. You can help your team overcome their nervousness by practicing at a competitors' field, if possible. To prepare younger players for new situations or opponents, host a roundtable session with veterans. The older players can describe their experiences, what the younger players should expect (both positive and negative), and what practical strategies they use to prepare.

**4. Follow pre-competition routines.** Ask players to write out and rehearse a routine that helps them feel comfortable. These routines can begin as early as the night before the game and conclude after pre-game warm-ups. There is no single best pre-competition routine. Just encourage your athletes to design one that suits their particular needs. Those who don't have established routines may want to emulate one used by a personal hero or an older teammate.

**5. Smile.** Smiling is a surprisingly effective technique. Not laughing, but simply raising the sides of the mouth. This influences feelings in two ways. First, most people connect smiling with being happy and relaxed. Second, research shows that when we smile, biomechanical changes occur that result in a relaxing effect. With an anxious athlete, forcing them to smile can markedly reduce tension.