

THE BIG IDEAS

Controlling the Pressure

Is the first step.

The Pause

Tolle says...

The Breath

Is the fastest way to gain control.

Mental Contrasting

Science says... It works.

Uniting

Against the pressure.

Pressure

Lessons from the Psychology of the Penalty Shootout

BY GEIR JORDET · PUBLISHER © 2024 · 288 PAGES

“In this book, I will present the highlights of my research. I will dig deeply into the constituents of pressure, how it manifests in penalty shootouts, and describe and explain how the world’s best (and some of the worst) penalty takers cope and maintain performance under some of the most extreme pressure conditions that exist in sport. ...

However, the focus is not only on footballers and their penalty kicks—it is as much on the experience and management of stress itself. As we shall see, the way that successful penalty takers perform under pressure is not only about a physical act, a kick at a ball. To be perfectly honest, I am personally not even that interested in the penalty kick itself. What happens to the ball after the foot has struck it is not my primary focus. It is all about the pressure that is on *before* the kick, what players think and feel, what they do, how they relate to and communicate with others. This is where the magic happens. And this is where the broader lessons are. Not many of us will be asked to take a penalty for our country in a World Cup shootout. But all of us will face pressure of some kind in our lives, and maybe it would be useful to know what we can do to prepare ourselves, overcome our fear of failure and survive, and even thrive, in those big-pressure moments.”

~ Geir Jordet from *Pressure*

Pressure.

We ALL feel it in various aspects of our lives.

And... Few human beings feel it quite as acutely as a soccer player getting ready to take a penalty kick to win a World Cup—which is one of the reasons why this book is such a fascinating read.

As per the sub-title, Geir Jordet gives us “Lessons from the Psychology of the Penalty Shootout.” The wisdom is based on his work as Professor in Psychology and Football at the Norwegian School of Sports Sciences.

Yes, you read that right. Geir is a Professor in Psychology AND FOOTBALL (!) at a university in Norway that is EXCLUSIVELY focused on “Sports Sciences.” Apparently, those Norwegians are serious about their football. That’s awesome. LET’S GO!

Geir has served as the personal psychology advisor to over 130 professional players across all major European leagues and has worked with more than 60 professional teams.

His specialty? You guessed it... PENALTY KICKS.

As per the front flap: *“The penalty shootout is the most intense drama in sport. The anxious wait, the building dread, the lonely, heavy-legged walk towards the penalty spot. One kick while the world holds its breath. Even football’s most casual observers cannot escape the nerve wracking suspense.”*

“Only big players can miss penalties because small players don’t take them.”

~ Ante Milicic, coach of the Australian women’s team, 2019

"Anxiety is a normal reaction in pressure situations. The question with respect to how it will impact performance is: how do you interpret it and what do you do with it?"

~ Geir Jordet

Geir explores answers to these questions: "What happens to a footballer's brain and body in these heart-pounding moments of pressure? Why do some thrive and others choke? When the game goes to penalties, what ultimately separates triumph from disaster?"

I got this book after working with some elite athletes and coaches in Europe. I can't remember which of the coaches referenced it but they HIGHLY recommended it so I IMMEDIATELY got it and read it in basically one sitting. It's fantastic. (Get a copy [here](#).)

It's PACKED with Big Ideas. I'm excited to share some of my favorites so let's jump straight in!

P.S. Check out [Peak Performance 101](#) for some of my favorite Big Ideas on the subject of performing under pressure. And... Check out our Notes on another book on the science of performing under pressure called [Choke: What the Secrets of the Brain Reveal About Getting It Right When You Have To](#) by Sian Beilock.

P.P.S. Check out [this 2024 commencement address by tennis legend Roger Federer](#). Fun fact: Federer gave that talk at Dartmouth where Sian Beilock happens to be the president.

CONTROLLING THE PRESSURE

"Routines help performers concentrate more effectively on their tasks and channel their attention in those critical moments immediately prior to a performance. Studies show that having a distinct pre-performance routine minimizes distractions, increases one's feelings of control and reduces anxiety. A meta-analysis of 61 studies with athletes from different sports concluded that pre-performance routines have a significant and robust effect on performance. The exact components of each player's routine are different—how they walk back, take up position, start the run-up, the number of steps they take, whether they look at the ball or the goalkeeper. There is not necessarily *one* correct way to do it. What matters is that players feel comfortable with their individual routine, spend time in training it, rehearsing it, polishing it, and making it robust."

That's from chapter #2: "Controlling the Pressure."

In chapter #1 called "Feeling the Pressure," Geir walks us through the effects of pressure. Then, he teaches us how to CONTROL the pressure.

The key?

In short: We need to create a clear protocol that we execute consistently.

Martin Ødegaard is one of Geir's case studies. As you know if you're a fan of soccer, Ødegaard is the captain for Premier League club Arsenal and the Norway national team. He's also a very good penalty kick taker.

Geir tells us: "A stable and steady pre-performance routine is a way to achieve more control in a high-pressure situation. There are countless ways to compose such a routine. Arsenal's Martin Ødegaard was not initially a regular penalty taker, but started taking some kicks in 2023, both in penalty shootouts and in games. He shared with me how deliberate his behaviors are, prior to penalties.

'I know how to place the ball on the penalty spot. I know what to do when I walk back. I take sufficient time. And I know what to do when I run up to the ball, and what I think and focus on then. So that is all I focus on really, and not much else. You don't know if the ball will go in or not, but until I strike the ball, I have a good grip on what to do.'

This clearly helps him to adopt a proper and productive mindset in these high-pressure situations: "There is a sharp and focused feeling. I am concentrated. I only focus on what I am supposed to do."

"Studies show that when athletes are put in the same pressure situations, some will interpret it as threatening (and negative), while others will interpret it as challenging (and positive)."

~ Geir Jordet

"Something that has made me so successful in penalty kicks for so long is the realization and the acceptance that I will miss them."

~ Megan Rapinoe

Geir continues by saying: "Control is a critical part of this: 'I decide about the ball. I want to be the one who controls the situation, and not let the situation take over. The thought behind all these things I do is that I want to control it. That I command the situation.'

He also explains that this is not something that just comes naturally; he works on it: 'I think you just have to find your zone and be comfortable with that. This is something I have trained so that I feel in the right zone.'

I repeat... Rather than think about the OUTCOMES of our performance, we want to focus on a PROCESS we can control that will allow us to maintain a tight focus on the task at hand such that we have the best shot (no pun intended but I'll take it!) at a successful result.

Why is this important? Well, as Sian Beilock puts it in [Choke](#): "When athletes think about themselves screwing up, they are more likely to do so."

THE PAUSE

"Can taking a pause before starting to execute one's task be used for coping with pressure outside of penalties and football? In September 2009, at a gathering called the Vancouver Peace Summit, there was a panel discussion with, among others, the Dalai Lama, four other Nobel Laureates and respected leaders in the fields of education, business and social transformation.

One of those was the German Eckhart Tolle, a well-known spiritual teacher and best-selling author. Tolle was asked by the moderator how 'creativity can arise from a mind that is not completely distorted by mental constructions.' Tolle closed his eyes and took a pause (who wouldn't when faced with such a question?), and then, slightly to the surprise of the audience, started speaking about football. He confided that he had listened to a researcher on BBC World News saying that those penalty takers who take a 3-4 second break after the referee's whistle were more likely to score than those who immediately started running towards the ball. There was, he implied, a clear lesson. The audience laughed warmly—not least when Tolle added that he hadn't watched a football match in about 20 years.

More seriously, Tolle characterizes this pause prior to a kick as 'stillness' and a 'redirection of attention to within, to a deeper layer of being, where all power resides.' This is more concrete and functional than it may sound. Anyone, in or outside of sport, can benefit from this. A moment of stillness prior to starting any critical task, perhaps using conscious breathing, will make it easier to ground yourself emotionally, plan the appropriate strategy and direct attention to where it is most required. (The researchers watching penalty shootouts with a stopwatch are of course in limited supply, so the one Tolle had heard on the radio was me—if there was any doubt.)"

The power of THE PAUSE.

That's another Big Idea from the same chapter on controlling the pressure.

Note: The key to controlling the pressure is to focus on what you CAN control.

And...

To state the obvious: *Pausing* before taking action so you can ground yourself and tap into that stillness Tolle talks about is a very wise idea.

We'll talk about some key elements of the pre-shot protocol in a moment.

For now, here's a little passage from Tolle's [The Power of Now](#) that captures the state we want to be in as we step up to the "penalty kicks" of our lives: "If it is the quality of your consciousness at this moment that determines the future, then what is it that determines the quality of your consciousness? Your degree of presence. So the only place where true change can occur and where the past can be dissolved is the Now."

"Performance under pressure, we are strongly reminded, is not about being fearless, and without discomfort; it is about acting despite fear and discomfort—acting directly in the face of those things."

~ Geir Jordet

THE BREATH

"Our sense of belonging constantly needs to be fueled by signals of connection."

~ Dan Coyle

"When Cristiano Ronaldo scored his decisive goal in the penalty shootout against England in the 2006 World Cup, not only did he pause for what was then an extraordinary length of time—almost three seconds after the whistle—he could also be seen taking three separate deep breaths. With each breath, his chest visibly inflated as he took air in, and the exhale was almost as forceful as some of his actions with the ball, his shoulders clearly dropping as his lungs emptied.

Long and deep breaths can be a powerful pre-performance technique in all types of pressure situations. When tennis champion Novak Djokovic is asked about his mental strength, he immediately talks about his breath: "There are different techniques. Conscious breathing is a big part, especially in the moments when you are under tension. The neurobiologist Andrew Huberman showed that a "physiological sigh"—five minutes of breathing where the exhale is twice as long as the inhale—had considerable effects on the amelioration of anxiety."

That's from the very next section in the same chapter.

The #1 way to bring ourselves into THIS MOMENT while slowing down our overactive mind so we can execute our task-oriented protocol? Focus on your BREATH.

Geir also tells us: "Diaphragmatic breathing, where the stomach rather than the chest moves with each breath, activates the parasympathetic nervous system, which induces relaxation. If one engages in more shallow, upper chest breathing, one will get the opposite effect—the sympathetic nervous system will be activated, which will stimulate a 'fight or flight' reaction. Thus, a good habit prior to a penalty kick, or for an equivalent high-pressure situation, is to take three or four deep breaths; breaths that are felt deep down in the belly. This can and should also be rehearsed away from the performance context. If your default breathing pattern is diaphragmatic, this will be a better foundation to fall back on when you are called upon to conduct deep breaths prior to performance under pressure."

This is one of THE BIGGEST things we focus on when Michael and I work with elite sports teams. We call it "Flip the Switch." There are THREE components:

1. Posture
2. Breath
3. Mental Focus

The first step in flipping the switch? We assume the posture of a warrior: chest up, chin down.

Then we take a deep breath. In through our nose, down into our belly, back out through our nose (or pursed lips)—with an exhale slightly longer than our inhale.

As Geir tells us, this deep breath is THE fastest way to activate our parasympathetic nervous system and reduce the negative effects of an overactive fight-or-flight response.

And, as Geir tells us, if you want to be able to flip the switch in the moment it matters most, YOU BETTER TRAIN that ability. The good news with our breath is that we can LITERALLY train it all day every day. See *Optimal Breathing 101* and our Notes on Patrick McKeown's [The Oxygen Advantage](#) and [Anxiety Free](#) for more on why and how to train our breath.

The third component of our Heroic Flip the Switch protocol? We optimize our mental focus—which is exactly what Geir tells us to focus on next.

He uses Novak Djokovic to make his point: "Novak Djokovic is an open advocate of mindfulness training and explains his approach as follows: 'I might appear locked in, but trust me, there is a storm inside. The biggest battle is within. You have doubts and fears. I feel it every single match. I don't like this mindset that I see a lot in sports—you know, just think positive thoughts, be optimistic, there is no room for failure, there is no room for doubts. This is impossible. You

"Pressure training seems to work. It changes athletes' relationship to pressure. It enables them to think: 'Yes, the pressure I am likely to experience in my role is uncomfortable, but it can be practiced for, adjusted to and controlled.'"

~ Geir Jordet

"This means that this is vitally important for a team to cope with and recover from a miss. A miss is often just a temporary setback. What matters is how the team collectively responds to that setback."

~ Geir Jordet

are a human being. The difference between the biggest champions and the ones who struggle to get to the highest level is the ability to not stay in those emotions for too long. For me it is relatively short. As soon as I experience it, I acknowledge it, I may burst or scream on court, whatever happens. But then I am able to bounce back and reset."

As Geir puts it: "Unpleasant and unsettling emotions are natural when performing under pressure. But if you accept those emotions and the inevitability of their presence, you will spend less time trying to regulate them and more time focused on what is necessary to produce your performance."

MENTAL CONTRASTING

"Performers can compensate for the negative effects of distraction by investing more mental effort in the task. This becomes easier with experience. Training will help. More experienced performers are less stimulus-driven (where attention is drawn to what the other person is doing) and more goal-directed (where attention is maintained on the task you are trying to solve). If you have been frequently exposed to distractions from other people, you are more likely not to let such distractions get to you and stay focused on your task. ...

In such situations, the performer needs to produce a clear and sharp focus on the upcoming task, while staying cognitively flexible enough to fluidly handle any distraction. It is much easier to resist the distractions provided by others if you have encountered, and successfully coped with, something similar before.

Planning is important, not only for reducing practical and logistical errors, but also for the psychological benefit that arises from reducing uncertainty. Mental contrasting is a technique to deal with such chaos: in other words, imagining the goal that one wants to achieve in the future and then imagining the specific path required to reach the goal, with all the obstacles and challenges to solve along the way. This strategy is shown to be substantially more effective for goal attainment than only imagining the goal itself."

That's from a chapter called "Exploiting the Pressure" in which we learn deeper skills to channel the pressure into peak performance.

One of the top recommendations? Practice something called "mental contrasting."

Mental contrasting is why the WOOP process that Gabriele Oettingen describes in her great book [Rethinking Positive Thinking](#) works.

You start with a vision of your ideal outcome THEN you imagine all the things that might get in the way of making that vision a reality THEN you figure out how you will overcome those challenges. Then you TRAIN that.

Here's how Heidi Grant Halvorson, another leading scientist, puts it in her great book [Succeed](#): "Then what is the best way to set goals so that you will reach them, without getting stuck daydreaming? The optimal strategy to use when setting a goal seems to be to think positively about how it will be when you achieve your goal, while thinking realistically about what it will take to get there. Oettingen refers to this as mental contrasting—first you imagine attaining your goal, and then you reflect on the obstacles that stand in the way. If you want to get a high-paying job after college, start by imagining yourself accepting an offer at a top firm, and then think about what stands between you and that offer—namely, all the other really outstanding candidates that will be applying for jobs. Kind of makes you want to send out a lot of applications, doesn't it? That's called feeling the necessity to act—it's a psychological state that is crucial for achieving a goal. Daydreaming about how great it will be to land that job or fall in love with that special someone you've had your eye on can be a lot of fun, but it won't get you anywhere. Mental contrasting turns wishes and day-dreams into reality, by bringing into focus what you will need to do to make it happen."

"The psychological game is more about accepting being vulnerable and exposed under this type of pressure, and then taking the necessary steps to cope with and perform under it. This involves skill development, control strategies, teamwork, quality pressure training and sensitive coach communication and support."

~ Geir Jordet

"This is something I have experienced so many times since: the ones who approach you after a presentation are nearly always the ones who are already the most proficient. They are very good, but they want to be better. This is the mindset of so many high achievers."

~ Geir Jordet

UNITING AGAINST THE PRESSURE

"After this, I had one more quote, which was accompanied by a video clip from that 2005 shootout: 'The other guys received me well when I came back to the group.' The video clip showed everyone welcoming and embracing a player who had missed. I then said: 'We can do even better than this. Here is my suggestion. When one of us misses a shot, we ALL walk over to get that player back into the group again as soon as possible!' The players listened but nobody commented on it, so I had no idea if this was something that they were prepared to do. During that eventual 32-penalty shootout, several Dutch players missed. Every time, the whole group broke free from the center circle and walked over to get the returning player back into the group, making the longest walk shorter. They then ended up winning the shootout. ...

Human beings have a fundamental need to belong. When we feel excluded, our body's alarm system fires. Indeed, exclusion activated the same neural and physiological alarm system that is involved in threats of physical harm. In key moments of failure, such as having missed a penalty shot in a penalty shootout and let everyone on the team down, the sound of the alarm is almost deafening. In this situation, receiving genuine hints that people still care, that one is still valued and is still part of the group, can have a significant positive impact."

That's from a chapter called "Uniting Against the Pressure" in which Geir walks us through the power of creating a sense of belonging and the best practices he developed to help teams respond to the inevitable failures players will experience during penalty kick shootouts.

I KNEW I would share this passage as a Big Idea. I also knew I would encourage you to check out [this +1 called Legendary Leadership](#) in which I share the story about how my friend John Herdman, coach of the MLS team Toronto FC, responded to a failure by one of HIS players.

Short story: His goalie was tricked in the LAST SECONDS of a game. An opposing player snuck around behind him, stole the ball, and scored a goal. It was CRAZY. The goalkeeper was SO BUMMED you could FEEL his pain. And... Right as the camera was showing his anguish, you see his coach John Herdman RACING across the field to console him—letting him know he had his back. Then you see all his teammates doing the same thing. It was a REALLY special moment.

Now... What I COULDN'T have predicted when I was reading the book was the fact that just a few days later, Emerson and I would be watching the Toronto FC game and guess what happened?! A penalty shootout. And... Of course, John's team executed all the best practices Geir talks about. And... They won. [This 3-minute highlight reel](#) is fun to watch but it doesn't show the most important part: the players welcoming their teammates back after a MISSED shot. That's where championships are won—when everyone feels a sense of BELONGING.

Here's to remembering that pressure is a privilege as we practice our philosophy and use those pressure-packed moments as opportunities to show the world what we've got!

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Brian Johnson,
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About the Author of This Note

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Brian Johnson is the Co-founder + CEO of Heroic Public Benefit Corporation and the author of *Areté: Activate Your Heroic Potential*. He's 50% Philosopher and 50% CEO and 101% committed to helping create a world in which 51% of humanity is flourishing by the year 2051. Learn more at heroic.us.

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