

# A Mental Toughness Formula



How To Perform  
Your Best Under Pressure

Lisa Lane Brown

The Courage to Win® in Sport  
How to Perform Your Best Under Pressure Presentation

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## **The Courage to Win in Sport Perform Your Best Under Pressure**

Why Mental Toughness Training?

Have you ever performed really well in competition?

Have you ever done the opposite? Performed very poorly?

Have you ever done BOTH in the same season?

What about the same month? Have you ever had both experiences in the same weekend? What about the same game, race or match?

How is this possible?

With the same skills, the same fitness level, the same strategy, the same team and the same coach, how is it possible you can be so good and so bad in the very same event?

The answer is obvious. The difference in your performance from one day to the next is not because of your skills. It's because of the 'mental game' of sport.

Most athletes are crippling their mental toughness without realizing it.

That was me, 16 years ago. I'm an athlete too (in the Canadian sport of ringette, similar to hockey). When I skated on the ice, a powerful and graceful side of me came out. Unfortunately, a dark side of me came out too. My dark side manifested in extreme confidence swings.

One week I was invincible. The next, my confidence came crashing down. I never knew why, and it hurt me all the time. My insecurity reached its zenith at the 1991 Nationals, where we lost with one second left on the clock.

It's hard to express my despair over this game in words. Losing hurt, but my deepest anguish came from the fact that I had choked in the biggest game of the year.

Worse, a friend of mine scored all 5 of our goals...but I wasn't happy for her. Outwardly, I pretended to be happy for her. "*Well done, Shauna. Way to go.*"

Inwardly, I was eating my heart out. I wanted to be a leader, but I had no idea how.

My coaches and friends said things like, “*You just need to believe in yourself,*” and “*Don’t worry about it. You’ll do better next time.*”

But no matter what they said, these failures really ate me up inside. Secretly, I knew that my failures had something to do with my mental game, and not just my circumstances. I seriously considered quitting for good.

Exhausted and depressed on the plane home, I broke, letting in the fear and shame I had been shutting out for years.

That's when I got serious about mental toughness training.

Fortunately, I'm a very stubborn athlete. I was obsessed with finding the answer to the question, “*What do superstar athletes and coaches know that I DON'T about mental toughness?*”

I wanted REAL answers...

Not something a guy with a PhD wrote in a book.

### **Why Most Athletes Lack Confidence**

The reason most athletes lack confidence is because while they may not always be aware of it, they are afraid.

Since fear is the opposite of confidence, any time we are experiencing self-doubt, anxiety, stress, nerves, or performance anxiety, confidence is basically impossible.

**That's why the Courage to Win® in sport is mastering fear to win under pressure.** Now, I'm not talking about normal, everyday nerves that happen when you compete. Nerves are completely natural. They make you alert and they activate you.

I'm talking about intense fear - the kind that makes you choke. The kind that makes your legs feel like jelly...that makes swallowing difficult...that makes you feel clumsy...that robs you of your aggressiveness.

97% of athletes never master choking fear.

The reason for this is simple. They have never been taught how to properly master it. Of course, the starting point to mastering fear is to understand why we are afraid.

### **Why Athletes Are Afraid**

I believe most athletes are afraid because they've been programmed by parents, coaches, and teammates to be obsessed with three things:

1. Performing well
2. Winning
3. Being confident

Now, let me be clear. There is nothing wrong with wanting these three things.

They are nice. They are very nice, and wanting them will help you become be the very best athlete you can be.

The problem is that you cannot control any of them. And let me emphasize this point, because it's REALLY important.

#### **You cannot control any of these things.**

If you could control whether you'd perform well, you'd always give a peak performance.

If you could control winning, you'd always win.

If you could control how you feel, you'd always feel confident out there.

And if you are obsessed with something you cannot control, you will feel scared and anxious all the time.

Control really IS the crux of the issue.

Of course, fear (bad nerves) does not make for great performance, because when it's strong, it interferes with our ability to trust ourselves.

In *Do Less, Achieve More*, author Chin-ning Chu describes this phenomenon beautifully:

*"All my life I want to be a great singer. I have spent more money on voice lessons than anything else.*

*Eventually, I realized the main reason I was not the singer I wanted to be was that my desire to sing well was so strong that it had caused my mind to hold my voice hostage.*

*When I sang, instead of just letting my voice go and simply singing, my mind would try and help my voice to sing. I recognized that, in fact, my voice always knew within itself how to sing. It was my mind that did not know how to sing.*

*As I released my mind from the effort of trying to sing, my voice was freed instantly."*

It's the classic dilemma.

You want to perform well and win so much that you crush your body's ability to let go and lead.

You over-think, over-analyze, and even try to make decisions in advance. You forget to let the come to you.

And, it's a vicious cycle. The more you try and control performing well, winning, and being confident, the worse you perform, and the more afraid you become.

Pressing is basically over-trying. In an attempt to control things and give yourself confidence, you force and PRESS. It is the opposite of letting your body lead...of letting the game come to you...of letting your event unfold naturally.

Before I started doing mental toughness training I was notorious for PRESSING, especially when it came to scoring goals.

I wanted to score goals because they made me feel good. So I'd shoot all the time, I'd only use my best shot, and I'd force shots from bad angles. I didn't pass much and if I did, it was usually when I was tired instead of when my teammates were open.

PRESSING made me super-predictable. Defenders and goalies could figure me out and shut me down pretty quickly. The only reason I still scored was because my raw skills were good.

Also I rarely noticed trends in the opposition's defence - trends that would have told me how to beat them.

One game I remember well. I was in the middle of a scoring slump and repeating positive affirmations on the bench (everyone told me that to be mentally tough I needed to think more positively). But it wasn't working.

I finally turned to my sister who played on my team. I said, *“How do you get your confidence back when you’re in a scoring slump?”*

She paused and said, *“I study the defence and goalie to see what they are doing to stop me. Then I use a better shooting strategy to beat them.”*

Ouch. So simple! Why hadn’t I thought of that? I hadn’t thought of that because I was PRESSING. Here are some examples of PRESSING...

If you're a tennis player or golfer, you try to hit winners by guiding and steering the ball, which messes up your technique.

If you're a basketball player, you try to do it all yourself by driving to the basket with 3 guys hanging off you.

If you're a baseball player, you try to hit a home run by over-analyzing your hitting technique.

PRESSING is the opposite of trusting yourself. When you press, you're trying to force an outcome. You interfere with your technique instead of letting your body lead.

The opposite of PRESSING is giving up, or under-trying. This is when you become passive, sit back, and stop caring. Of course this never works to bring out your best.

### **Exercise**

Consider your own experience for a moment. Can you relate? Do you sometimes PRESS because you are scared? How does this affect your performance?

What about the opposite? Do you sometimes give up too easily because you fear failing? How does this affect your performance?

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### **The Courage to Win® in Sport Formula**

Superstar athletes think differently. Instead of making these three mental errors, they create breakthrough confidence under pressure. Here is the Courage to Win Formula for creating breakthrough confidence and winning:

## **“Face Your Fear, Release Your Fear, Trigger Your Confidence”**

1. Face Your Fear
2. Release Your Fear
3. Trigger Your Confidence

### **Face Your Fear**

There is a better way to deal with choking fear than PRESSING (over-trying) or giving up (under-trying).

The starting point to mastering fear is to face it.

You can listen to your fear and diagnose *why* you are afraid. This will give you the information you need to master fear so you can trust yourself and restore your confidence.

This is the beginning of true courage, yet we are not trained to do it. In fact, the main thing we are taught in Western culture about fear is that it's shameful. Basically, our culture believes fear is a weakness. The Nike t-shirt “No Fear” pretty much sums up our attitude towards fear.

That's why it took me years to learn how to face my fear in sport. For a long time I was convinced I wasn't supposed to have any fears about competing. This idea was drilled into me by coaches and sport psychologists.

The books I read told me to “change the channel” of my mind any time I got scared or frustrated during competition. These authors implied that the reason I got scared was because my mind was weak.

I even had a sport psychologist tell me to put my fears into a mental Black Box and never think about them.

What a boneheaded idea.

Fear and frustration are part of competing. The faster you deal with them, the more mentally tough you will be.

As I said, the easiest way to deal with fear and frustration is to listen to them. Tremendous relief comes from listening to yourself, because you do not have to pretend, cover up, or stuff down your fears about competing.

You enjoy an inner relaxation that is heavenly. And there is even more good news.

When you accept yourself in this way, it's easy to figure out WHY you are feeling stressed or frustrated.

You can DIAGNOSE why you're anxious and then PRESCRIBE a solution for it. Once you apply the solution, your fear will be cured.

### **Brandon, Badminton**

*“Lisa I won the first match and was up 18-12 in the second. I just needed three points to close it out. But I got anxious. I hit the bird into the net and then out. He got momentum; I got frustrated...I ended up losing the tournament. Lisa I need more mental strength.”*

Can you see Brandon's MAJOR problem?

What he's missing?

He's thinking about the fact that he got nervous and choked.

And he's putting himself down for choking.

He forgot to ask WHY he got so nervous.

So I asked Brandon the one question he WASN'T asking: *“What was happening in this match that filled you with choking fear?”*

As it turns out, Brandon's opponent is a long time rival. Brandon beat him five months ago by moving him around the court.

See, Brandon's trademark is his quickness. He specializes in exhausting the other player, moving him around the court so he can't get shots back.

That's how Brandon won five months ago.

But then the inevitable happened.

After he lost, Brandon's rival got mad.

Then he got better.

When he saw Brandon again, he was returning Brandon's shots. This unnerved Brandon, whose strategy hinges upon his opponent not being able to get the bird back. He doesn't have a great serve or disguise shots well, so this is his major way of getting points.

Here's what you can learn from Brandon...

There's a story behind every match, every game, and every race. There are physical, technical, and tactical REASONS why one side wins.

There aren't many flukes in sport.

That's why it's so sweet when you win.

But Brandon forgot to dig up the story. He got upset about his fear instead.

### **Exercise**

Write down the last time you "choked" in a performance that mattered to you.

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Write down the technical reason WHY you were losing, making mistakes, or just not performing. Examples: Examples: "The ball was coming at me really fast and I didn't know how to handle it," or "I was getting stuffed by the defense and I couldn't get by them to the net," or "I had no idea how to read the greens."

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The next time you choke, step back and figure out why you were getting so worked up. You'll know, and simply knowing this will help you get back in CONTROL.

### **The RIGHT FOCUS:**

#### **How To Cure Fear, Correct Errors & Restore Self-Trust**

Now that you know *why* you're scared, it's time to PRESCRIBE a solution.

The solution is always the same, and it's to improve your skills and performance.

For this you need to know how to correct errors. To correct errors, you need to trust yourself. This will cure your choking fear, because self-trust is the essence of athletic confidence.

You gain self-trust by using the proper RIGHT FOCUS.

## What Is A RIGHT FOCUS?

A RIGHT FOCUS is a specific variable that, when you pay attention to it, corrects your technique or strategy and restores your self-trust.<sup>3</sup>

### Carly & Batting

Carly, one of the best hitters on the Canadian softball team, was not batting well.

I wanted to diagnose what part of Carly's batting had gone awry, so I asked her to watch the pitcher carefully and tell me *exactly when the pitcher was releasing the ball* by saying the word "pitch".

The first two times she said it, she was late - instead of saying "pitch" exactly when the ball was released, she said it a fraction of a second after the release.

I told Carly this, and she quickly corrected it and said "pitch" at the right time.

We then chatted for a few minutes until I asked her to resume the exercise.

Once again, Carly was calling out the pitch too late, but she didn't realize it. I had to point it out to her. This told me what had gone wrong with her batting - Carly was reading the pitch too late, and therefore swinging her bat too late.

Why was Carly doing this?

...probably because she was a little afraid of the pitch.

By making her RIGHT FOCUS the *timing* of the pitch, she was able to self-correct her batting and hit with confidence again.

Bear in mind that there can be many different RIGHT FOCUSES for one skill.

For example, Carly's problem could have been reading pitches (not being able to tell the difference between a ball and strike). In that case, I would have asked her to say "*ball*" every time she thought a ball had come over the plate and "*strike*" every time she thought a strike had come over the plate.

When you are making errors such as hitting the goalie (hockey), slicing a ball (golf), hitting the ball out (tennis), getting beat on defence (basketball) or over-throwing a rock (curling), it's because you are not paying enough attention to a certain RIGHT FOCUS—*you just don't realize it*.

## **Exercise**

Please answer the following two questions. Write down what you were thinking about/paying attention to during your **best performance** in a high pressure competition:

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Write down what you were thinking about/paying attention to during your **worst performance** in a high pressure competition<sup>4</sup>:

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## **Your RIGHT FOCUS**

Select a RIGHT FOCUS for your next event that will help you gain awareness and bring out your best performance. For example:

“I want to be able to call the hog to hog times to the second so I’ve got draw weight.” (Curling)

“I want to box out every time on defence.” (Basketball)

“I want to make sure my alignment is perfect.” (Golf)

“I want to only take shots from the slot.” (Hockey)

“I want to say Ball or Strike correctly for every pitch so I know what to swing at.” (Softball).

“I want to run down every ball, no matter what.” (Tennis).

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## **Release Your Fear**

Once you’ve listened to your fear and identified your Right Focus, you can release your fear.

There is a very powerful method for this called The Sedona Method.

In *The Sedona Method*, author Hale Dwoskin explains that most adults only really know two ways of dealing with fear and other emotions: either suppressing

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them or expressing them. We've lost touch with our instinctive gift of being able to release them, the way we did as children. He says, *"Have you ever watched a young child get furious with a playmate or a parent, and even say something like, 'I hate you and will never speak to you again,' and then, just a few minutes later, the child feels and acts as though nothing at all has happened?"*

Children automatically release negative emotions as a way of being. As a result, they find it much easier than adults to jump in and take action, try new things, express themselves, give and receive love, stay in the present moment, and be incredibly resilient.

The first reason to release fear is because when we fear something, we constantly ruminate on it, sometimes to the point of even bringing it about. As Lester Levenson, the creator of the Sedona Method said, "Fear, and it will appear."

Have you ever noticed this when playing a sport?

Let's imagine that you're terrified of missing your shot in a way that will create a three point end for the other team. Chances are, you will, because you're putting mental energy into that outcome.

On the other hand, when you're free of this fear, it's like you can do no wrong. You can get away with the most aggressive shot or difficult angle, because all you can think about is making the shot.

The second reason to release fear is because once we've listened to its wisdom, letting it go is really the only effective way to deal with it. The truth is that the mind cannot deal with fear in any meaningful way.

Eckhardt Tolle explains this in *The Power of Now*: "The psychological condition of fear is divorced from any concrete and true immediate danger. It comes from many forms: unease, worry, anxiety, nervousness, tension, dread, phobia, and so on.

This kind of psychological fear is always of something that MIGHT happen, not of something that IS happening now. You are in the here and now, while your mind is in the future. This creates anxiety gap...and if you have lost touch with the power and simplicity of the Now, that anxiety gap will be a constant companion."

There are actually several techniques you can use to let fear go, but perhaps the easiest and most effective is The Sedona Method. The Sedona Method was pioneered by Lester Levenson:

“In 1952, at age 42, Lester, a successful physicist and entrepreneur, was at the pinnacle of worldly success, yet a very unhappy, unhealthy man. He had many health problems, including depression, an enlarged liver, kidney stones, spleen trouble, hyperacidity, and ulcers that had perforated his stomach and formed lesions. He was so unhealthy, in fact, that after having his second coronary, his doctors sent him home to his Central Park South penthouse apartment in New York City to die.

Lester was a man who loved challenges. So, instead of giving up, he decided to go back to the lab within himself and find some answers. Because of his determination and concentration, he was able to cut through his conscious mind to find what he needed. What he found was the ultimate tool for personal growth - a way of letting go of all inner limitations.

He was so excited by his discovery that he used it intensively for a period of three months. By the end of that period, his body was totally healthy again. Furthermore, he created a state of profound peace that never left him through the day he died on January 18, 2004.

Here is the Sedona Method and the questions from Step Two:

1. **Instead of resisting the fear, welcome it; you can even try to make it stronger as an energetic experience. Then ask yourself, “Can I welcome this fear?”**

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How did this go for you?

This question might have surprised you because I just told you that we were going to release fear. It seems counter-intuitive, but before we can release fear or any negative emotion, we need to experience it first.

The reason for this is that most of the time, what is causing us to hold onto an emotion is our resistance to it. As Dvoskin explains in the Sedona Method, “If you walked around with your hand open, wouldn’t it be difficult to hold on to the pen or other object you’re holding? When you welcome a feeling, you are opening to your consciousness, and this enables the feeling to drop away all by itself like clouds passing in the sky.”

In The Sedona Method, you ask yourself the following questions:

1. What is the emotion I’m feeling? (Fear, anger, frustration, disappointment, sadness)

2. Can I let it go?
3. Will I let it go?
4. When?

At each step, make sure you pause and answer the question honestly. Sometimes, if you say, “No! I won’t let it go!” and you are able to accept this from yourself, it paves the way for your body to let it go at a later time.

### **Exercise**

Pick a fear or another negative feeling that has been haunting you, and answer the four Sedona Method questions on paper here:

1. What is the emotion I’m feeling? (Fear, anger, frustration, disappointment, sadness)

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2. Can I let it go?

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3. Will I let it go?

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4. When?

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Sandra Schmirler, three-time world curling champion, learned the psychological importance of releasing fear when gearing up to qualify for the Olympic trials in 1995.

The circumstances leading to Team Schmirler’s birth at the Olympic trials were intense. Although her team was heavily favoured to “three-repeat” at the 1995 Scott tournament of Hearts, they instead suffered a disappointing loss.

A few months after losing the Scott, Team Schmirler learned that their best chance to qualify for the Olympics would be at a ‘best-of-three’ playoff between the 1994 and 1995 Scott winners.

Sandra and her teammates felt this playoff tournament would be their best chance to earn a spot at the Trials because the timing of the playoff was ideal: if they won, they could take the season off and have children and still come back to compete at the Olympics the following year. However, this realization only put more pressure on them to win the playoff and clinch a spot at the Olympic Trials as early as possible.

The week leading up to the Trials playoff was not a good one for Sandra...until she decided to release the fear:

*'I would be driving around Regina and just burst into tears. I thought I was losing it. Out of desperation, I called a team meeting on the Wednesday night. We were leaving in a couple of days. I didn't know what to do.*

*We had a pretty intense conversation. I shared my thoughts and doubts. I even told them to go without me. I said, 'I can't play'. The expectations in my head were overwhelming. This was our shot to qualify and ease up for a full year and to seriously try and start families.*

*Good old Joan finally asked the right question to put things in perspective. Joan zeroed in on the dilemma - What was the worst thing that could happen?*

*The question started to snap Sandra into a healthier mind space.*

*'We lose! Whatever happens, happens. It's not the end of our lives. Maybe we get a second chance to qualify, maybe we don't, but we've said all along it's our families that are the number one priority.*

*It took so much pressure off. I knew the team was with me, even if I didn't play up to my potential. I went to Thunder Bay really loose.*

*I wanted to win as much as ever, but I guess I needed to hear that, win or lose, my identity as a person shouldn't be dominated by whether I curl well or not. The people who really care about me are going to love me and support me regardless." (Scholz, Guy. Gold on Ice, 1995).*

### **Trigger Your Confidence**

It turns out that the quickest and easiest way to trigger your confidence is to visualize yourself performing perfectly in your biggest events.

Research has shown that if you imagine an experience in your mind -- with EMOTION -- as far as your brain is concerned, you have actually HAD this experience. In other words, visualization is extremely powerful because it gives you a success EXPERIENCE that your brain believes is real.

Visualization creates confidence because your mind does not know the difference between an experience you've had and an experience you've imagined. For example, you don't need to win Wimbledon to BELIEVE you can.

Tennis star Novak Djokovick says, "Dare to dream. I was dreaming of becoming number one. Wimbledon was in those dreams. Then, in a span of just two days - my dreams came true. For a long time after that, images were moving in my mind - clearer than ever before."

### Visualization Exercise

Sit in a quiet space where you will not be disturbed. Close your eyes and relax. Focus on your breathing. Breathe slowly and deeply. Once you are relaxed, go back to a time in your mind when you felt really confident and powerful in competition. Re-run this scene in your mind. *Allow the feeling to grow stronger as an energetic experience. Re-access the confidence, relaxation, pride, and positive energy you had at that time.* Continue this for at least 5 - 10 minutes.

Write a few lines on what you experienced during this exercise. What happened to you? Were you able to recall a situation? What feelings did you have? If you couldn't summon any feelings, describe what happened to you emotionally. Feel free to describe your thoughts; however, please make sure that you also describe the emotions you had during this exercise. If you were not able to access any emotions, please record exactly what you did feel. Describe what did happen.

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There are several things that may have happened to you during this exercise. Do not be concerned if you felt distracted, numb, or even negatively at any point during it. Merely record your experience.



Your friend,  
Lisa Brown

Thank you for attending this session. It has been a pleasure working with you. Please send me success stories anytime to [info@lisabrown.ca](mailto:info@lisabrown.ca). I hope to see you again in future training. For more information on private coaching or online training, visit [www.thecouragetowin.com](http://www.thecouragetowin.com).