

# UNDER PRESSURE



## Breaking the breakdown *How athletes can succeed when eyes are watching*

by **Sinéad Schouten**, *Sports Co-Editor*

The free throw line is a lonely, untouchable place. Senior **Katie Knupper** knows this well on a rainy January evening, as she lines up at the top of the key for the fifth time that game. Crimson Paso and purple Righetti line up on either side, the weight of their eyes on her shoulders. A silent second is followed by a shot, a swish.

Knupper cracks a smile as she gains a point – and some peace of mind.

“I don’t mind free throws for the most part,” the varsity center said, who went six for nine in her free throws that Jan. 20 night. “But you can ruin it for yourself if you let people get in your head. That’s when the trouble starts.”

This trouble is stress: our natural reaction to high intensity. For as Knupper took her practice dribbles, her heart was naturally beginning to work overtime, pumping adrenaline into her blood stream and expanding her lungs, according to anatomy teacher **Jon-Paul Ewing**. This fight-or-flight reaction is meant to come out in life-threatening situations. And when bleachers full of students are watching your basket, the pressure of their stares can make or break a moment.

Competitors have to handle cheers and boos, coaches and parents, and expectations of victory. The free thrower’s wrists, the diver’s knees, and sprinter’s legs are all forced to respond in a controlled, practiced way, regardless of emotions and distractions.

There’s only one way to a win, and that’s a calm body and mind.

Most PRHS teams practice two to three hours a day, and there’s a reason for that. Much of sports success is found in repetition. The common adage of “practice makes perfect” is true. Repeating actions connects neurons in the brain, forming links that can be remembered and called back on, according to a BBC.com report. By practicing movements over and

over again, muscle memory is formed, giving an athlete the skills they need. Even under pressure, the body will naturally remember what it needs to do.

But while a practice start might be easy enough with only your teammates watching, junior **Liam Hoagland** finds the blocks a little different on race day.

“People joke around more at practice. It’s not as intense,” Hoagland said, who runs the 100 meter dash. “Once you’re in the blocks at a meet and the official yells ‘set,’ I can completely feel every muscle in my body tensing. My heart starts to pound in my ears.”

In the heat of the moment, a sprinter can forget to drive with their arms and come out low down the lane. But that’s when the after school hours pay off. Through muscle memory and a disciplined body, an athlete can act instead of think. Separating the anxiety of the starting gun from the start he’s practiced at least 20 times a week, Hoagland can leave the blocks at the head of the pack.

But there’s one thing fueling this explosion down the track: adrenaline.

“Your body devotes resources to the needed organ systems to either run away or stand and defend,” Ewing said. Stress causes heart rate and blood flow to increase. Nerve impulses make your skeletal muscles move, endocrine system flood your body with hormones. Adrenaline, one of these hormones, opens vessels and allows more oxygen into the brain, raising alertness.

“The stress response is how an athlete can perform to the best of their ability. Almost all athletes ‘get pumped-up’ a competition.” But Ewing admits that while adrenaline does “supplement and prolong” this natural high, an athlete’s success is as much mental as physical.

The trained body can be a fine tuned machine, but without

the brain to properly guide it, it’s a car without an engine. For Cal Poly sports psychologist Jeff Troesch, it’s his job to make sure that engine is running on all cylinders.

Troesch has been assisting Mustangs since 2004 in coping with the pressures of collegiate sports, not focusing on the stats and figures associated with sports success, but instead breaking down each day into a set of smaller, simpler goals. Even if it’s only running one lap extra, the goal to get “one day better, every day” can show strong improvements.

“If they are looking for a magic potion or think they can just apply some ‘tips without doing to work to implement the suggested changes, then I guess I can ‘only do so much,’” Troesch said. Yet with hard work and taking his advice to heart, Troesch is assured a positive mind set and improve any competitor.

But just as practice is a physical key to performing under pressure, how an athlete does their practicing can make all the difference.

In the search for how to best prepare athletes for performing in the spotlight, in December 2002 researchers from Michigan State University challenged three groups of golfers. The test was to see which training circumstances produced the best results. The first group learned how to tee under normal conditions; the second had a tape making background noise; and the third was with a video camera in front of them recording their progress. Researchers hoped that the second and third groups would answer a critical question: which helped competitors more, learning to ignore the outside or focus on the inside?

All groups performed the same during a low-pressure, average putt test. But during the high pressure test when they were told that their performance could earn a monetary award, the results were different. The normal condition and the distraction groups, one and two, did much worse. But the third, video camera group didn’t choke when the stakes were high.

Conclusion? Learning under pressure helps performing under pressure.

So after hours of free throws, pushing out of the blocks countless times, and adapting the art of calm inner focus, athletes like Knupper and Hoagland can prove that practice does indeed make perfect. PRHS athletes no longer have to fear the heat of a moment, being carefully watched by parents and teammates.

Each person handles these stresses differently, but the key is learning to embrace what makes hearts race.

Photo by Josh Orcutt  
Graphic illustration by Ryan Morrison

## TIPS FROM TROESCH **Cal Poly sports psychologist gives advice to PRHS athletes on competing their best**

**1** “Make sure every day you have a clear purpose and intention about what you are going to accomplish in your practice/training/competition, and make sure you evaluate this at the end of every day. ‘Did I do what I said what I was going to do?’ Good feedback loops keep athletes progressing toward excellence, which is what it’s all about.”

**2** “Athletes need to understand that achieving mastery in any sport is very, very difficult and it requires hard work. There are no shortcuts. I think many athletes are under the misconception that it comes easier than it does.”

**3** “You better love the sport in order to put in the required time to be successful. If it feels too much like work and not enough like fun, then there is a high likelihood for burnout or drop out.”