

Mastering Athletic Demons  
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Demons run amok on the athletic field. They sometimes thwart even the most accomplished athletes. Most of them populate the six-inch space between an athlete's ears, often referred to as the place where competitive sports are played, and they typically emerge under pressure. Controlling demons--not succumbing to them--is the central psychological challenge most athletes face. Those who master their demons can fully display their talents, while those who fall prey to them cannot play their best. Who or what are these demons that often prevent athletes from reaching their goals? Simply put, they are the mental obstacles that plague even the best athletes in the world.

Getting to Know Your Demons

While athletes battle many demons, some of the least recognized and most pervasive ones are the *fears of excelling and winning*. This may seem like a strange thing to say, since it's at odds with the conscious experience of most athletes, who believe and feel they want to play their best and beat their opponents. If they do feel fear when competing, it's usually the fear of playing badly, losing or humiliating themselves, for which sports provides unparalleled opportunities. The demons that emerge under the pressure of competition, however, often spring from unconscious sources—fears rooted in old experiences, beliefs, and self-concepts.

Evidence of the power of demons to sabotage performance is abundant. Mental demons undermine achievement at every level of play, from the weekend golfer on the verge of shooting his personal best, to the high school soccer star trying to prove him or herself to a college scout, to the major league pitcher making his first start in the big leagues. For each athlete the personal stakes are high. As pressure mounts and there is more on the line, one's vulnerability to demonic interference increases.

Most athletes do not know why they suffered collapses or letdowns—because these self-sabotaging forces largely operate outside of conscious awareness. While some demons can be controlled by applying well-known mental skills—positive self-talk and visualization, or maintaining a consistent pre-game routine—others overwhelm even the most rigorous attempts at applying mental strategies to rein them in. For the power of demons lies in their invisible, stealth-like nature. They infiltrate the psyche without being recognized; they travel under the radar.

You may wonder why any athlete, professional or amateur, would fear winning. It makes no intuitive sense. Nevertheless, winning can be scary. Winners attract lots of attention. Winning creates expectations that you will win again. Winning elevates you above your peers and thereby distinguishes you from most athletes. Other people may feel jealous or envious of winners, sometimes even resentful or inadequate. Winning, then, may arouse anxiety or guilt about making others feel bad or mad. Simply anticipating this can be uncomfortable,

even intolerable. In this case envisioning oneself as a winner may feel a bit like wearing a coat that doesn't fit.

Ironically, while not winning may feel safer and less burdensome than winning, playing it safe by staying in your comfort zone can be worse. For unless you feel confident you are doing the best you can, you will not be entirely comfortable staying there. Part of you knows you can do better, and wants to achieve more, excel, and make the most of your talent and ability. Knowing you are not realizing your potential and achieving all you can is distressing—and may make you feel frustrated, hopeless, or depressed—not exactly a recipe for inner peace and joy.

Although in many people's eyes it is shameful, if not contemptible, to fear winning, it has more insidious consequences not to address one's fears. To keep fears underground is to remain prone to self-sabotage and risk chronic failure to reach one's potential. Moreover, unexamined fears readily emerge elsewhere in disguised forms. The strategy I recommend—*identifying and confronting one's anxiety*—seems to contradict the popular wisdom that says one must focus on the positive and eliminate any negative thoughts. Staying positive, however, does not mean you must deny your fears.

Knowing your fears can liberate you from their crippling effects. Discovering what you are afraid of—contrary to popular belief—does not mean dwelling on it and getting stuck in a morass of self-doubt, self-blame, or self-pity.

How can an athlete recognize he or she is afraid to excel or win, if these fears are hidden? It may be useful to think of times when you did not perform your best under pressure, and identify the type of mistakes you made, and what you felt and thought at the time. Then think of times—in any competitive effort—in which you were successful and received praise, recognition, or rewards, and ask yourself: How did you feel and act afterwards? Were you proud, fulfilled, celebratory, on cloud nine—or did you feel nervous, self-conscious, embarrassed, undeserving, apathetic, or deflated? Did you enjoy your success or devalue and dismiss it as “no big deal”—or perhaps attribute it to something besides your skill, talent and hard work, such as luck or others’ help?

Questions like these can clarify whether you really feel entitled to excel or win—and want the responsibility that comes with it—or are unsure that you belong in the same company as established winners. Winners allow themselves to play their best and vanquish their opponents because they know that even if they crush an opponent’s psyche or spirit, winning itself is not destructive. They know it is not their responsibility to protect their competitors from feeling bad.

When one feels safe to express one’s fears and anxieties - to an empathetic and knowledgeable listener - this establishes distance from one’s demons and enables one to observe, examine and speak about them. This can feel like lifting a veil on a long-held, often shameful secret. Engaging in this process neutralizes demons, rids them of their insidious power, and frees one from their debilitating impact.

If overcoming fear is viewed as a challenge that all winners must face, sports can become a superb opportunity to master one's personal demons.