

HOCKEY SPECIAL REPORT



10 'COSTLY' MENTAL GAME MISTAKES PLAYERS MAKE WITH PREGAME ROUTINE

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The 10 “Deadly” Mistakes Hockey Players Make With Their Pregame Attitude

Most every competitive hockey player experiences what I think are positive pregame jitters – the feelings of excitement prior to a hockey game. However, many of these athletes experience more than just jitters; they under perform due to performance anxiety – a sinking feeling in the pit of their stomach. Pregame jitters are a natural part of sports, but pregame performance anxiety will cause most players to tense up, worry about their performance, and not perform up to their ability.

Pregame jitters can cause you not to sleep the night before a game. You might not be able to eat a regular meal the morning of a game. The pregame jitters may make you feel like you want to throw up. However, many athletes use pregame jitters to instill a positive tingling of excitement in anticipation of a game.

Experienced hockey players want to feel positive pregame jitters. Positive pregame jitters help instill an optimal level of mental activation, which can boost focus. However, too little or too much physical activation (or anxiety) is not ideal for finding a flow or performing at peak levels. Your ability to learn how to cope effectively with pregame anxiety is critical to consistent performance.

Your pregame mental preparation is the best time to manage your emotions and thoughts about your upcoming hockey game!

Let's discover if you are committing one of the 10 “deadly” mistakes during your pregame preparation.

PREGAME MISTAKE #1:

Placing strict expectations on your performance

Despite what others have taught you about positive expectations, maintaining high, strict performance expectations can actually limit your success. One hockey goalie I worked with would think, “I need to score a shut out in the game today,” and unravel when someone scored a goal. I teach my students about the hazards of strict expectations. You must learn to identify your strict expectations. Your goal is to replace expectations with manageable objectives (also called mini-goals).

Why do high expectations about your performance limit you? First, you set yourself up for a success/failure proposition. You either achieve your expectations or fail to achieve them. Second, if you don’t achieve your predetermined expectations, you tend to question your ability that day - either

during or after performance. Essentially, expectations set you up for failure before you even start.

In addition, expectations are usually about results such as achieving a personal statistic such as plus/minus or points earned in the game. Hockey players often judge their game based on these expectations. In most cases, your expectations equal pressure and pressure can turn into pregame anxiety.

PREGAME MISTAKE #2:

Leaving self-confidence to chance

Self-confidence is paramount in all sports including hockey. If you have a high level of belief in your ability, you'll most likely not be anxious. Many athletes who lack self-confidence in their ability leave their confidence to chance. They do not take responsibility for confidence. If you can only feel confident when you make a couple strong plays at the start of the game, your confidence is prone to vary widely.

Are you unsure how you will perform prior to a game? I teach my students how to be proactive with their pregame confidence. You don't want your confidence to be thrashed around by immediate results at the start of the game. How do you react when you start the game with a couple mistakes? You want a proactive approach to confidence – not a reactive approach.

PREGAME MISTAKE #3:

Getting distracted by the hoopla of the game

The commotion or atmosphere of playing in the big game such as a high school state championship, NCAA national championships, or junior tournaments, for example, distracts athletes during the pregame routine. Do you feel additional pressure to perform well in the big game when the hype leading up to the big game causes you stress?

Why do you think the super bowl has two weeks of hype after the conference championships? The media can jump on all the stories and expose every nugget of information about the players and coaches. If you allow the pregame excitement to distract you from your real mission, you will not be fully prepared to compete.

PREGAME MISTAKE #4:

Carrying life's worries into sports

Some athletes have trouble “parking” life events or daily life hassles when they enter competition. Whether the issue is a term paper or a daily hassle such as not getting to practice on time because of a flat tire, one goal of mental preparation is your ability to separate your life from hockey.

If you take life's worries into a game, you will be distracted and not fully focus on performing your best. Do you have trouble separating your roles outside of hockey with your role as an athlete?

PREGAME MISTAKE #5:

Over-training before competition

Perfectionist players in hockey spend too much time in a training mindset just prior to competition. I use the analogy of cramming for an upcoming test. Your best option is to study every day instead of waiting until the last moment to cram all night for the test. In sports, you never want to cram during the final week before the competition.

Your goal is to feel prepared when you compete – both physically and mentally. However, you don’t want to panic the last two days and start to rework your mechanics or technique to ensure you will perform well. You might feel tired or over think in the next game.

PREGAME MISTAKE #6:

Worrying too much about results or outcomes.

Your pregame worry, anxiety, or tension can come from several sources depending on your personality. What causes you to become anxious or stressed is different from what another athlete experiences. I think that most worry comes from focusing too much on win/loss or more specifically, the consequences of winning or losing a game.

For example, a hockey player might worry about not racking up enough points during the season, but the real anxiety might be directed at the fear of embarrassment, impressing a scout, or letting a parent down. Your worry about the consequences of not scoring is stressful. You might be the most anxious about what you think others might say or think about you if you don't score or get assists.

PREGAME MISTAKE #7:

Poor planning or lack of a game plan

You should never enter competition without a game plan. In team sports such as hockey, most coaches will give you the game plan. On the other hand, individual players must be able to focus on their own game plans and strategies. You want to have a game plan that helps you play to your strengths and contributes to your team goals.

PREGAME MISTAKE #8:

Psyching yourself out before competition

Do you compare yourself to your competitors before competition? Some athletes I know place too much emphasis on the other team’s prowess, and come to feel they don’t “stack up” or deserve to win. Your confidence can quickly go in the tank when you make comparisons to other athletes who you think are better than you. Besides, you can’t focus your best if you are

distracted by gawking at your competitors or worrying about how well the other team plays.

PREGAME MISTAKE #9:

Worrying too much about what others think

For many athletes, a massive source of pregame worry about performance comes from a need to have others “approve” of their performance. If this is you, you might have the need to be admired, accepted, respected, or liked by other people. You worry about performing poorly or making mistakes because you think it may influence what others think about you.

Thus, if you crave approval from others such as parents or teammates, you are more likely to become anxious or are afraid to fail in competition. Your need for approval from others underlies and supports fear of failure.

What happens when you want others’ approval, but can’t get it? Stress! Many people who need others’ approval to feel good about themselves are prone to pregame anxiety.

PREGAME MISTAKE #10:

Allowing fear of failure to be the top motivator

Fear of failure occurs when players are motivated by not losing or not making mistakes, such as losing the puck in your own end. The root causes are complex, but fear of failure usually starts when athletes worry about the potential consequences of failure. There are several secondary issues related to this fear, including anxiety, tension, pregame anxiety, trying too hard and lack of trust – just to mention a few.

As a mental game expert, I work with my students every day on these common mental errors. The objective is to understand how you might be sabotaging your performance with ineffective attitudes or poor focus.

Your mental preparation is one aspect of your performance you have total control. Do not leave mental preparation to chance or external forces that you can't control, such as your opponents, the conditions of the rink, or the fairness of the officiating.

Once you complete your physical training, you want to enter hockey games with confidence and focus. Be proactive and take personal responsibility for your mental game or mindset before every hockey game!

The Top Six Objectives of Your Pregame Mental Preparation

Consistent mental preparation leads to consistent performance, the hallmark of champion athletes. Your pregame warm up is an excellent time to integrate your mental strategies. You should think of your pregame routine as your final mental tune-up prior to competition. It has six important purposes: (1) to feel prepared, (2) to instill confidence, (3) to focus the mind, (4) to prepare for adversity, (5) to have a game plan, and (6) to enter the role of athlete.

Your main objective of pregame mental preparation is to achieve a focused, confident and trusting mindset prior to competition. Below are the six major objectives you'll want to accomplish.

|1| To feel prepared and ready

When you feel prepared, you feel confident. When you feel fully prepared, you feel ready to play your best too. Everything you do prior to games (practice, workouts, and scouting opponents) helps you feel ready to compete. Of course, you have to put in the time to work on your skills prior to each game, but then you must have trust in the training and practice you have completed.

|2| To feel confident in one’s skills

Confidence is the number one objective of your mental preparation. Confidence without strict expectations is my formula for success. Confidence comes from many sources depending on the athlete, including practice, preparation, game plans and the pregame mindsets you bring to the game. A hockey player may feel confident in his skating ability, his ability to perform a slap shot successfully or his ability to make successful passes throughout the game.

Confidence is a long-term project, and develops from years of practice and play. Most athletes should have a good foundation of confidence – one based on past successes and practice. However, some athletes doubt themselves at the worst possible time – during the pregame warm up (for more information, see [“The Confident Athlete”](#))

For example, a goalie may have doubts about his ability to stop the puck, which undermines self-confidence.

|3| To focus on execution

What you focus on prior to competition is critical to your mental game success. I teach athletes where to direct their focus and how to improve their refocusing skills when competing.

A player’s focus and ability to control the direction of the focus may be the single most important mental skill, second only to confidence. If you struggle with maintaining your focus during shifts, you will make more mental errors, get

distracted easily, and under perform. If you can focus well while reading this book, you likely have the power to concentrate even if for short periods of time. But most athletes at one time get distracted, are unable to keep focused, or sometimes misplace their focus during competition. (For more information, see [“The Focused Athlete”](#))

|4| To prepare to cope with adversity

I could probably write an entire book about this often-overlooked component of pregame mental preparation. With experience, athletes learn how to cope with any adversity – with situations that could cause them to lose focus, confidence or composure (such as injury, being benched, or psych-outs from competitors). If you haven’t experienced many adverse situations, you’ll have to anticipate the challenges that might affect your mindset, and develop strategies to cope with each. Your goal is to be prepared mentally for anything that may happen in competition, such as having to defend a power play being down two players and be able to cope effectively.

|5| To finalize a game plan or strategy

In most team sports, like hockey, coaches give athletes a game plan. A game plan is composed of strategies and tactics designed to give the hockey team the best chance of winning. In hockey, a game plan usually includes the plays a hockey team might select to run, such as a give and go pass.

|6| To fully enter the role of the athlete

I use this phrase to help athletes make the transition between life and sports. I want my students to shelve any life challenges or hassles, and learn how to focus your attention fully on the game.

The warm up or pregame routine is a time to begin focusing on hockey. Think of your routine as a transition from school, or normal activities to competing in sports. Some athletes contemplate about life issues when they play hockey, and

this affects their focus and performance. Use the pregame routine to let go of daily hassles, deadlines and chores – to become fully engaged in hockey. See [The Relaxed Athlete](#) for more information on pregame routines.

Summary

Your pregame mental preparation is paramount to setting the stage for peak performance in hockey. You want to embrace pregame jitters as helpful to your performance. However, if positive jitters turn into anxiety or apprehension about performance, you will not perform with a free mindset or confidently.

You must be proactive with your mental preparation and not be indecisive about a positive pregame mindset. If you want to learn powerful mental strategies for superior pregame preparation, I suggest you look into [***The Relaxed Athlete: A 14-Day Plan for Optimal Mental Preparation***](#) CD and workbook program.

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