

Keeping a Cool Head

*Maintaining Composure Even When You
Get Rattled*



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Composure

The Beijing Olympics in 2008 were starting to be a disappointment for gymnast Shawn Johnson. The possibility of four gold medals had slowly been whittled away. The women's team, predicted to win gold, settled for silver. Johnson herself was widely hailed as the favorite to win gold in the all-around competition, only to have it snatched away by teammate Nastia Liukin. A silver in floor exercise also fell below expectations.

Johnson's last chance at gold came on the final night of the women's competition on the balance beam – an apparatus that is only four inches wide. On that four inches, Johnson had planned a series of gravity defying jumps and flips that most people couldn't even contemplate performing on solid ground. A lesser athlete might have been rattled by disappointment of unmet expectations, but Johnson owned the beam that night. She was rock steady. And she finally got her gold medal.

Alicia Sacramone also had a disappointing Olympics. During the team competition, she fell on both the beam and floor exercise – two of the three apparatuses on which she was competing for the US team. Sacramone's distress was apparent on her face as her competition crumbled around her. And with each event, one could see her self-confidence waning.

Why am I telling gymnastics stories to hockey players? Because the contrast between the two teammates – Johnson and Sacramone – is illustrative of what happens when one maintains composure (as Johnson did) and what happens when one loses composure (as Sacramone did). Both women were extremely talented and at the top

of their sport. The weight of expectations was placed strongly on Johnson as the team leader. And yet, in spite of disappointment, Johnson maintained a wide smile throughout the competition. Ultimately, her composure paid off. Sacramone, on the other hand, was progressively more visibly shaken and upset as the competition progressed. Her lack of composure likely led to her poor performance.

The ability to maintain composure on the ice is an essential skill for peak performance. Composure is the ability to maintain poise and focus during a game – no matter happens.

All champions who have ascended to top of their sport have done so in great part because of composure. Without the ability to stay composed, key mental components of all sports such as confidence and focus suffer, leading ultimately to sub-par performance.

In golf, the contrast between Tiger Woods and Sergio Garcia is another example of the difference composure provides. Both Woods and Garcia are widely hailed as two of the most talented players in the game. Woods has 14 major tournament wins under his belt. Garcia has none. The difference? Woods is able to maintain composure no matter what pressures he faces on the course. He is, quite possibly, one of the most composed athletes in all of sports. Garcia, on the other hand, is far more likely to succumb to pressure when the stakes are high.

In this workbook, we will take a close look at composure, giving you strategies for maintaining your composure, no matter what the circumstances.

The top ten ways to get rattled

Let's face it. Stuff happens. If you played perfectly 100% of the time and everything always went your way, you'd probably be the most cool-headed, composed player on the ice. But this is the real world. Sometimes, things don't go your way. And when they don't, it's up to you to be prepared to deal with it.

Identifying the attitudes that can rattle you is the first step in building composure.

Poor self-image

How do you think of yourself – not only as a hockey player, but as a human being? Do you see yourself as someone who always chokes? Or perhaps you have a belief that you never perform well in the big games. What labels and definitions do you apply to yourself? Negative self-definition and labeling can cause you to lose your cool as you allow negative thoughts to infringe on your mind during the game.

Fear of failure

Being unsuccessful doesn't feel very good. But lack of success can propel you on to growth. Fear of failure, on the other hand, holds you back. Being afraid of losing may cause tentative play as you try to protect yourself from a loss rather than going for the win.

Intimidation

It can be intimidating playing against opponents that you know have mad hockey skills. But, when you focus on the strengths of your opponents, you take your attention away from your

own strengths and skills. Being intimidated by your opponents can become self-perpetuating. As you focus on your opponents' skills, you become intimidated. Being intimidated leads you to focus more on your opponents' strengths. Which leads to more intimidation. Which leads to....you get the idea.

Dwelling on mistakes

We all make them. But we don't have to let mistakes control us. When you dwell on your mistakes, frustration sets in, which can lead to a loss of emotional control. And if you are not in control of your emotions, you're not composed.

Being a perfectionist.

If only we could be perfect. But we're not. We're fallible human beings with all of the attendant imperfections that go with it. Perfectionists can become easily rattled, focusing on mistakes instead of what needs to be done to perform well.

Worrying about what others think

It is natural to want others to think well of you. But if you start to worry about what others think about your performance, you become distracted as you start to play to meet the expectations of others rather than focusing on the task at hand.

Lack of emotional control

Do you let the other guy get to you? Are you easily angered or frustrated? Fearful or tense? When you don't control your emotions, then your emotions control you. Allowing your emotions to run the show is a sure-fire way to draw your attention away from the fundamentals you need to play the game.

Being stuck in a comfort zone

Just as perfectionism and having unrealistically high expectations can rattle you, so can having expectations that limit your potential. If you are stuck in a comfort zone, you may be distracted by the knowledge that you are not living up to your potential or the fear that your teammates are passing you by.

Irrational beliefs

Do you have beliefs not based in reality? Such irrational beliefs can cause you to be stuck in old patterns. They can also cause worry as you focus on unrealistic thoughts instead of focusing on what you can do to be a success.

Doubt

When you doubt your capabilities, you lose confidence. And if you aren't confident, you may be more likely to get upset and lose composure.

Building a Composed Mindset – What Rattles You?

Do you see yourself in any of the items above? Perhaps there are other things that rattle you. List five attitudes that cause you to lose composure.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Cool and confident – the role of confidence in composure

The ability to perform to your potential lies in a strong sense of self-confidence. Self-confidence is the belief in your ability to be able to execute the skills you need at the moment that you need them. If you have doubts about your abilities, then you lack confidence.

If you lack confidence, then it is difficult to be composed on the ice. Low levels of confidence may cause you to play tentatively, instead of strongly performing the tasks you need to perform. Additionally, a lack of confidence opens up your mind to nagging thoughts and doubts. Those thoughts that intrude on your mind during play can distract you and lead to you display poor emotional control as you become upset or frustrated.

Furthermore, a lack of confidence can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you don't believe in yourself, how will you ever reach your full potential. And if you aren't playing up to your potential, how composed will you be?

Another lack of confidence that can hurt you is a lack of confidence in your composure. It sounds like circular reasoning – lack of confidence can cause lack of composure. Lack of composure can cause a lack of confidence in your ability to remain composed. If you lack belief in your ability to maintain composed, once again self-fulfilling beliefs will come into play. How composed will you be if you don't believe you have the ability to be composed?

Confidence can be built in a variety of ways. Let's look at a few ways that you can grow your confidence.

Practice composure

Good news. We're working on that right now! Later in this workbook, we'll work on some specific strategies for practicing composure. In the meantime, an easy way to practice composure is through visualization.

Exercise: *Sit or lie down somewhere comfortable. Take deep breaths to relax. In your mind visualize an event from your list in the last section that will trigger a lack of composure. Now visualize yourself maintaining your composure in the wake of that event.*

Keep your expectations realistic

Expectations are designed to stretch you, not break you. They are a double-edged sword. Expectations that are too high can lead to frustration and loss of emotional control. Conversely, expectations that are too low can cause you to play below your abilities – leading a lack of confidence. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance that you keep your expectations on the high side of realistic. Set goals for yourself that are achievable, but that will push you as a hockey player.

Building a Composed Mindset – Keeping It Real

It's time for an expectations checkup. List five expectations you have of yourself. Are they too high? Are they high enough? If they are, how can you adjust them to be more realistic?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Focus on the present.

When you are present and focused in the moment, your mind doesn't have space for doubts, fears or frustrations from the past. Maintaining present-moment focus on the task at hand is a sure-fire way to maintain your composure. Present-moment focus is a skill that can be built with practice.

Exercise: *As you go about your day, and as you go about practice, step back and notice when your mind drifts away from the present. Some clues that you are not focused on the present include worrying about something that has happened or thinking ahead to something that will happen. When you catch your mind drifting, take a deep breath and refocus your attention to whatever it is you are doing right now.*

Focus on what you think – not what others think.

Self-image that is inspired by the opinions of others provides a false sense of confidence. If you rely on the opinions of others as the basis of your self-worth, then you run the risk of having your fragile self-esteem crushed by even the most offhand remarks of disapproval. Instead, base your sense of self-worth on what you know to be true about yourself. Self-esteem based on principles such as the knowledge that you work hard and always try your best can't be swayed by others' opinions.

Building a Composed Mindset – Confidence Comes from Within

Are you too reliant on the opinions of others? List five things from which you derive your confidence. Are the sources internal or external?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Watch how you talk about yourself

What kind of labels do you apply to yourself? Do you think of yourself as a success, or as a failure? Often, we are unaware of the labels that we use to describe ourselves, and equally unaware of how those labels can harm our self-confidence. If you constantly repeat a message such as, “I never score goals,” the chances are that you are creating your own reality. With a little practice, you can catch yourself when you use a negative label about yourself and learn to replace it with a positive one.

Exercise: *As you go about your day or during practice, pay special attention to thoughts and words that start with statements like, “I am a...”, “I always...”, “I never...” If you begin a sentence in such a manner, you are about to apply a label. When you catch yourself making such a statement, replace the negative label with a positive one. For instance, “I never score goals,” could be replaced with, “I am a strong hockey player. It’s just a matter of time before I get a goal.”*

Focus on the positive

It’s easy to get caught up in the negative. Focusing only on the negative, however, is a quick way to cause your confidence to crumble. While it is important to take a moment to learn from your mistakes, getting stuck focusing only on mistakes does you no favors. A number of positive events occur during games. Focus on what you have done well.

Building a Composed Mindset – Staying Positive

List five things you did right during your last game.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Are your knees knocking? Keeping fear from destroying your composure

Fear of failure is natural. At one point or another, we are all called upon to perform in a situation that terrifies us. We worry about embarrassment, rejection or letting others (or ourselves) down.

Fear triggers a fight or flight response in humans. Improperly channeled, it can cause a complete lack of composure as focus shifts from the task at hand to keeping yourself safe.

Fear can also cause you to perform cautiously or defensively on the ice. This keeps you from reaching your full potential as a hockey player.

Are you driven by fear or success? If you are driven by success, your focus is on performing to meet your positive goals. If you are driven by fear, your focus will more likely be on avoiding whatever pain it is that you feel will result if you fail.

Sometimes you will fail. It is an inevitable part of life that can be used as a catalyst to drive you on to greater success. That simple fact, in and of itself, should be a huge step in releasing your fear of failure. Simply put, ***failure can drive success.***

Like every other mental skill, you can learn to manage fear and turn it to your advantage. By replacing your focus on fear with a focus on success, you can change your mindset from fear-driven to success driven.

Let's practice changing a thought process driven by fear to one driven by success. In the table below, there are several attitudes that are fear driven. Using the examples provided, can you replace each fear-driven process with one driven by success?

If fear says....	Then success says....
There is no way I can lose to this creep. I wouldn't be able to stand it if I did.	I need to focus on the task at hand. If I focus on one thing at a time, then the rest will take care of itself.
If I don't score a goal, my parents are going to be upset with me.	I am going to play to the best of my abilities, and I will be proud of myself.
Everyone always tells me how talented I am. If I'm not the best, I will be so upset with myself.	
I can't make any mistakes. I don't want to let my coach down.	
I've put so much work into hockey. I won't be able to stand it if I am not a superstar.	
If I play better than my teammates, nobody will like me. I need to make sure that I don't outshine anyone, because I don't want them to be embarrassed.	

Now that you've had some general practice at changing fearful thoughts to successful thoughts, it's time to focus on fears that you personally have. In the table below, list five of your top fears in the first column. In the second column, reframe your statement so that it is a success-based statement.

If my fear says....	Then my success will say....

Exercise: Say or write the following affirmations to yourself daily.

1. *I am not concerned with avoiding mistakes in games.*
2. *I am driven by success. I focus on what I want to happen.*

Hitting the wall – maintaining composure when you are at your limit

Exhaustion is part of sports -- exhaustion of all types; mental, physical, emotional. Sometimes we hit a wall. Sometimes the wall you hit has nothing to do with hockey. It could come from the pressures of school, family or friends. Or, sometimes you may become exhausted during a game. And yet, even in the face of such pressures, you still have a game to play. Does that mean that your performance during the game is doomed? It doesn't have to be.

Mental toughness in the game of hockey sometimes requires pushing through a wall. Sometimes you are not feeling well. Sometimes you didn't get enough sleep. Sometimes, for no reason that you can ascertain, you are simply at your limit.

So, you've hit the wall. For whatever reason. How do you push through it? To quote Nike, *Just do it*.

Consider this. Does it make sense to you that every top athlete is on their game 100% of the time? Just like you, the top athletes in the world can hit a wall. But somehow, they manage to play through it.

Take the example of seven time Tour de France champion, Lance Armstrong. The Tour de France is considered one of the most grueling competitions in all of sport – requiring competitors to ride more than 2200 miles in 22 days with a series of races through the mountains and countryside of France.

Armstrong's story is well-known. After battling – and beating – cancer, Armstrong went on to become the winningest bicyclist in the history of the Tour, winning for seven consecutive years. Certainly, Armstrong hit the wall many times during his races. But he pushed through. And you can, too.

Easier said than done, right? Kind of. But you can just do it. Here are some strategies.

Mentally focus before the game

If you head into a game feeling mentally, physically, or emotionally tapped out, it is possible to reset your thinking before you start to play. By using the principles of visualization and mental focus, you can charge yourself up so that you can push through the wall.

Exercise: *You're in the locker room getting ready for the game. You didn't get much sleep last night, and you have a huge math test on Monday. Not only that, but you had a fight with your mom on the way to the rink. Take a few minutes before you get dressed to really focus. Close your eyes and take a deep breath. Visualize yourself skating across the ice, focused and filled with energy. Use your five senses to imagine how that would feel.*

Just do it

Sometimes, that's what you have to do. Just push on through whatever wall is in your way. Chances are, if you push through and maintain your focus, you will come out on the other side. And the fact that you have managed to push through that wall will help you to feel terrific – no matter how you were feeling when you hit the wall.

Fake it until you make it

Here's a secret: *Most great athletes are also great actors.* You can bet that Michael Jordan, Tiki Barber and Michael Phelps have all had days where they didn't feel up to the task. And yet, on most of those days, they managed to perform magnificently anyway. How did they do it? There's a good chance that they were faking it.

Researchers have long known that pretending to be happy, smiling, laughing can lead to actual feelings of happiness, just as pretending to be sad and frowning can lead to feelings of sadness. So wouldn't it follow that acting energetic, affecting confident body language and acting as if you feel terrific might lead to feeling energetic, confident and terrific?

You can learn to fake it. Some characteristics to develop include:

- Thinking tough. Use words and images to keep you going. For instance, if you feel exhausted even before the start of the game, you might think: *What a great challenge today will be! I'm going to have to be tough. If I can do it now when I feel this lousy, I can do it any time I want!*
- Acting tough. Use your body to convey positive states such as confidence and energy. For example, if you just made a huge mistake and let an opposing player slip by you for a goal, adopt a confident posture and a big smile as if to tell your opponents – *you got me this time, but next time, watch out!*

Stay in control – keeping your emotions in check

It bears repeating. Stuff happens in hockey. All kind of stuff – that could make you angry, frustrated, elated, devastated – hockey is an emotional sport. It brings to mind the old opening for ABC's *Wide World of Sports* in which athletes were shown completing some tremendous feat as host, Jim McKay intoned, "*The thrill of victory,*" followed by an image of ski jumper, Vinko Bogataj, crashing disastrously to McKay's, "*and the agony of defeat.*"

This iconic phrase came to symbolize the emotional roller coaster of sports in America's collective psyche – *the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat*. Every athlete, upon hearing these words, knows exactly what they mean.

Hockey is no different. You will experience thrills. You will experience agony. You will experience everything in between. Welcome to the game. So, how is one to maintain composure in light of such strong emotional stimulus? By learning to control your emotions in the face of adversity.

No one can make you feel anything except for you

How often have you caught yourself thing, *Geez, that guy really makes me mad*, or *Man, this game is really frustrating me*? Chances are, it happens from time to time. Here's a secret: nothing can make you mad (or frustrated, or happy, etc.) except for you. Although it may not seem like it, your emotions are a

choice. When you become angry, upset or frustrated, it is because that is how you are choosing to feel in that moment. While it is certainly natural to feel frustration in the face of adversity, it is important to understand that it isn't the adversity that causes the frustration – it is your beliefs about that adversity.

So, if you choose the emotions, then it follows – you can also control them. That's good news! By exercising a little mental control, you can keep yourself from becoming side-tracked by emotion. How?

- Catch the feeling. (Recognize). As soon as you realize you are slipping into extreme emotion, catch yourself. Locate the source of the feeling, take a deep breath and tell yourself that you have control.
- Reframe the feeling. (Regroup). Now that you recognize that your emotions are spiraling out of control take a moment to regroup. Tell yourself to get back on task. Use fake it until you make it strategies if you have to.
- Get your head back in the game. (Refocus). Now focus on what you have to do in the moment. Focus on your skills that you need to accomplish the task at hand rather than dwelling on what just happened.

Being ready for emotion

If you are aware in advance of the mindsets that will bring up extreme emotions during the game, then you will be better prepared to deal with them.

Exercise: *The table below lists various mindsets that could cause you frustration during play. For each mindset, list a strategy that you can have prepared to deal with negative emotion that may arise as a result of each mindset.*

Mindset	Strategy
Expectation	
Dwelling	
Frustration	
Irrational Beliefs	
Negative Emotions	
Mistakes	

Manage your expectations

Unmet expectations can lead to extreme negative emotion. Expectations that leave no room for imperfection can be a source of pain. Take a look at your unrealistic expectations, and try the following:

- State the expectation. For example, *There is no way I can afford to make a single mistake today.*
- Replace the expectation with a manageable goal. For example, *Today I'd like to take four quality shots on goal.*

Now it's your turn. Use the space below to list some unrealistic expectations you have when you go into a game. How can you replace them with an achievable goal?

Exercise: Write or repeat the following affirmations to yourself daily:

- No one can make me feel frustrated or angry but me.
- Errors are just errors. I can react with composure.

It's a plan – being prepared to deal with adversity

The best way to learn to control your negative emotions is by being prepared to experience negative emotions before you go into the game. Adversity happens. It's part of the game. So, it's best that you are prepared.

By going into the game with a non-judgmental attitude of acceptance and realizing that you can, indeed, control your emotions, you will be able to maintain composure on the ice no matter what circumstances arise.

Let's start by identifying situations where you are most likely to lose your cool. List your top five below:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

In each of the situations on the previous page, what is the source of your frustration? Is it the event or your beliefs about the event? List the beliefs and judgments you have about each of the events listed that are the actual source of your frustration.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Now, replace each of the above beliefs or thoughts with a new belief or thought that will help you continue to play with composure. For instance, if your thought is, *I can't believe I missed that shot – it was such an easy one. I'm never going to do well if I can't shoot*, then replace the thought with, *Even the world's best hockey players miss occasionally. I will recover from this and play a great game.*

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Now you have strategies that you can practice. The next time you find yourself that frustrates you, practice the coping strategies developed above.



To summarize the steps from the previous page:

1. Identify a mistake that causes you frustration.
2. Identify the beliefs behind the mistake that are your actual source of frustration.
3. Replace the belief with a belief that will help you to go forward with composure.
4. Practice the strategies that you have developed.

No wasted energy – focusing on the things you can control

There is a prayer used in 12-step programs:

Grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change;
courage to change the things I can;
and wisdom to know the difference.

If ever there was a prayer for composure during athletics, this is it. During the course of a hockey game, there are things you can control and things you can't. Do you know the difference?

Focusing on things that are beyond your control is distracting, at best, and can lead to a loss of composure and confidence during the game. Your job as a hockey player is to have the wisdom to know the difference between those things you can and can't control so that you can direct your focus constructively.

Things you can control

There are plenty of things that you can control during a game. Those things include:

- Your thoughts
- Your behaviors
- Your performance
- Your reactions

Things you can't control

Likewise, there is much that is beyond your control. These include:

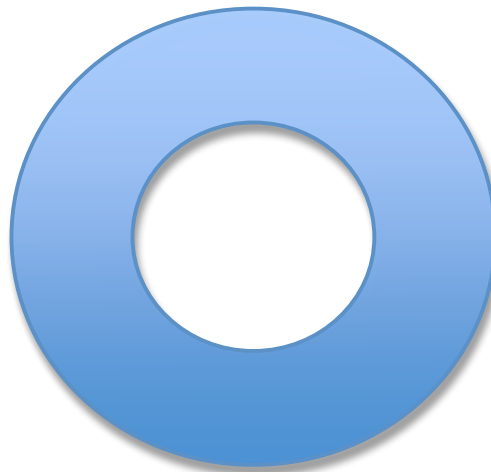
- Events or people over which you have no influence
- Play of your teammates
- People in the crowd
- Environmental concerns

Exercise: *The picture below is your circle of influence. The inner circle reflects those things over which you have control. The outer circle reflects those things over which you have no control. Make a list of nine things that arise during a game, and then place them in the proper circle.*

Events

Circle of influence

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.
- 9.



Traits of composed hockey players

Do you have composure on the ice? The answer to this question is entirely up to you. Using the steps outlined in this workbook, you can practice becoming more composed.

What is your vision of a composed hockey player? The list below lists some traits of composure. Which would you like to cultivate to improve your composure on the ice? Select from the list below, or add your own.

- Concentration
- Confident posture
- Positive self-talk
- Poised under pressure
- Loves playing
- Unflappable
- Intimidating to competitors
- Positive thinker
- Smooth pacing
- Calm when behind
- Doesn't give up
- Hits the wall and keeps playing
- Loves a challenge
- Accepts mistakes
- Refocuses after mistakes
- Relaxed
- In control
- Poised
- Even-tempered
- Collected



You can be the hockey player that you envision yourself to be. By working to build your mental skills, you can be confident, composed and focused. You can be the player on the ice who keeps a cool head in the face of adversity.

The secret to composure lies with controlling your emotions, rather than letting your emotions control you. If you remember only one thing, remember this: your emotional reactions to events that occur during the game are a choice.

By remembering that you are choosing how you feel in the given moment, you can use the principles outlined in this workbook to help you stay cool and collected, no matter what is happening around you.

A final thought about composure. Canadian Hockey player, Bobby Hull, once said this, *“Always keep your composure. You can't score from the penalty box; and to win, you have to score.”* I couldn't have said it better myself.

About Kevin Willis

In 1980, the United States Men’s Olympic Hockey team beat a stronger faster, more physical Russian team to win the gold medal in the Lake Placid Olympics. Watching that historic moment in sports sparked a lifelong passion for the game that has led Kevin Willis to become Master Mental Game Coaching Professional and Level 5 USA Hockey coach with more than 20 years of playing and coaching experience.

While pursuing his Masters in Coaching, Kevin wrote the thesis, “The Mental Game of Hockey.” He was surprised to discover that very few books or articles had been written on the mental aspects of the game. As a result, Kevin began developing Mental Game Coaching workbooks, workshops and one-on-one coaching specifically designed to help hockey players improve their mental game.

Kevin is the founder of HockeyTough.com, and is a certified MGCP (Master Mental Game Coaching Professional) who works with players, parents and coaches to bring a new level of mental focus to the game of hockey.