

[Psychology]

DON'T BE UNDONE BY A SQUEAKY BUM

How to survive buttock-clenching crunch games, courtesy of mental skills coach Bradley Busch

1 Pressure: bring it on!

Remind yourself pressure is a privilege: it means you're close to achieving your goals. Consider the alternative: playing weak opponents in irrelevant matches. Think of what you set out to do, why it matters and what to do to achieve it – then enjoy the challenge.

2 Work, work, work and focus on the fundamentals

Often when you try too hard to gain that last one per cent, you forget to do 99 per cent of the stuff that got you into a winning position in the first place. Work harder, too. Win or lose, no one ever looks back and regrets working hard and striving to be their best. Focus on your game and what you need to do on the pitch. The result will take care of itself.

3 Personal goals + keeping it simple = winning formula

Don't overthink how you got yourself into this position. Go into too much detail and you run the risk of turning your smooth performance into something that is quite mechanical. Set personal goals. Even when things are going well, there will still be areas to improve. Never settle for good – push yourself to be great.

4 Note to self: every game is the same

The only thing that changes in a crunch game is the magnitude of the consequences of winning or losing. The game is bigger, but it's no different. You are still the same player, playing on the same size pitch, with the same rules. Don't direct your attention to the consequences; focus on your game plan and on the processes you have to complete to perform well.

5 Play in the present

The brain craves control and certainty. When you focus on what other teams are doing (lack of control) or what the result might be (lack of certainty), alarm bells start ringing and you get nervous. In order to perform at your full potential, give your brain what it wants before a match: control and certainty. Do this by focusing on *your* performance.

6 Don't fear losing

The path to success is never a straight line. Setbacks will happen. Once you accept this, it reduces the stress when they do, and you can spend your energy on getting back on top. People react to setbacks one of two ways: it either defeats them or it's the making of them. Choose to use your setbacks as fuel for your motivational fire. Remember how bad the moment of failure feels and vow to work harder than ever before to never feel like that again.



Interview Ben Welch Illustration Gary Neill