

Staying Cool in the Face of Adversity, Wins
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Why do some wrestlers choke or get crazy with anger in adverse competitive situations and other wrestlers stay calm and focused on the job at hand? Why do some get negative emotion flowing and others remain positive?

Remaining positive in difficult situations takes great mental toughness. No matter what is happening either on or off the mat, being tough means you can generate positive emotion that allows you to get to your 'ideal competitive state' of being – the state of being where you are challenged, energized and excited about the fight. Along with that you will have the physical, mental and emotional strength of conditioning and discipline to bring you through. This is real toughness in wrestling.

Toughness, however, can be sabotaged by negative emotional responses. Negative emotional responses to the stresses of competition include:

1. Tanking – The act of quitting or giving up inside and/or making excuses.
2. Getting angry and negative
3. Choking

All of these negative responses tend to relieve the pain and fear that accompanies competitive adversity or failure. Quitting or giving up are the biggest example of 'tanking'. Excuse making and reducing your amount of effort is another common form of 'tanking'. Subconsciously, some athletes tend to realize that if they reduce their emotional involvement it will reduce fear and nervousness during the match. Here are some specific examples of 'tanking':

1. "The ref screwed me, how can I possibly win."
2. "My coach is a jerk; I'll never wrestle well with him around."
3. "I didn't really try today...otherwise I could beat him easily."
4. "I hate wrestling overseas. The food stinks; the hotel was bad and my time clock was off."
5. "My opponent cheated. That's why I lost."

Getting angry during the heat of the battle or after a loss is another form of negative emotional response to adversity. Like 'tanking', the anger response to competitive situations also acts as a protective mechanism for the wrestler. It can be used to protect one's self image.

As a coach, I have seen this happen many times to some of my athletes as well as others. Some very successful wrestlers tend to fall into this trap after they have experienced major accomplishments and now are struggling with what, in their mind, should be a lesser opponent. They forget that every match should be wrestled with the same challenged attitude that got them their previous victories. Some accomplished wrestlers tend to think, now that they have succeeded, every opponent should just lie down for them...and that every referee should give them all the close calls, always giving them the edge.

The moment you start thinking that things should always go your way is the time you are in trouble. You have to wrestle every match like you love it. Enjoying the competition of each match is what will keep you sharp and passionately into your career.

Anger can be directed in two directions. Inward or outward...Inward means you get angry with yourself saying such things as “Boy, I am terrible” or “That was stupid, man what an idiot I am.” This inward anger is sure death for you. The outward directed anger, I contest, is also, in the long run detrimental to your performance. You may get away with it on occasion but more likely than not, it will blow up in your face.

I believe to be at your best you must be having fun. Being angry all the time goes against the idea of enjoying the battle and living your career to its fullest.

One great example of being calm and focused in the face of competitive adversity comes to mind:

1. **RULON GARDNER**, at the 2001 World Championships in Patras, Greece had to defend his historic Olympic Gold Medal performance when he beat the legendary Alexander Karelin from Russia. In Patras he had the toughest draw of any weight class. The pressure was on! In the quarterfinals he met up with the new Russian superstar, Patrenkeev, who had beaten Rulon twice previously. It was an extremely intense match with the whole wrestling world watching. With one minute remaining in the match, Rulon found himself down 0-3. Very calmly and with great focus Rulon rose to the occasion. His continued and relentless attack on the Russian allowed Rulon to secure a good body lock where he then threw his foe through the air directly to his back – pinning him for the comeback victory. Rulon, of course, then went on to defeat his next two opponents winning the 2001 World Championships.

‘Tanking’, anger and fear are all normal responses to the pressure of competition.

Responding to crisis, adversity & pressure with a sense of challenge and love of the battle takes intense practice and should be the goal of all wrestlers who strive for the ultimate success. The true champions and leaders of our great sport have mastered this toughness skill that helps them to be champions not only in wrestling but also in all aspects of their personal life.

“EXPECT TO WIN”