

Slumping at Work? What Would Jack Do

How Nicklaus, Other Athletes Can Spark an Office Comeback

By SUE SHELLNBARGER

After years in sales, Dan Di Cio, a Pittsburgh account executive, was aiming for "a breakout season" selling high-tech equipment. But even working longer hours and weekends, he kept falling short of his goals. Watching other salespeople win awards, he asked himself early this year: "Why can't I be that guy?"



Associated Press

Jack Nicklaus

Mr. Di Cio, a big baseball fan, recalled how Major League pitcher John Smoltz got help on his mental game to pull out of a slump in 1991. Mr. Di Cio contacted sports psychologist Gregg Steinberg after hearing him speak and, with his help, Mr. Di Cio learned that he was working so hard that he risked driving his numbers even lower. Dr. Steinberg says he prescribed the same remedy many pro athletes embrace: Stop overworking and allow yourself to relax.

Mr. Di Cio says his outlook improved so much that his boss asked, "What's different about you?" His 2010 sales have doubled over a year earlier.

Few events rivet people's attention more than a great athlete in a slump, from Tiger Woods's lackluster performances on the golf course earlier this year to Yankees' slugger Alex Rodriguez's drought before hitting his 600th home run. Even when the world isn't watching, the same psychological hurdles trip up the rest of us, executives who aren't making their numbers or producing enough good work on the job. At the office, people lose confidence, dwell on past mistakes, become anxious about every move and struggle to perform tasks they once enjoyed.

"The principles that lead to slumps are the same" in both realms, says Dr. Steinberg, a Nashville, Tenn., author and speaker on performance issues. Signaling a slump, he says, are a loss of confidence, over-thinking every move, dwelling on past failures or working too much.

A star pitcher for the Atlanta Braves, Mr. Smoltz had a dismal record of 2-11 at the All-Star break in 1991 when he tapped sports psychologist Jack Llewellyn for help. "I had lost my confidence," says Mr. Smoltz, now a Major League Baseball analyst for television network TBS. Frustrated, he was trying to break out of his slump with hard work, but he was rushing himself on the mound and overanalyzing every bad pitch he made, he says.

With Dr. Llewellyn's help, Mr. Smoltz worked to recover more swiftly from a bad pitch. He repeatedly watched a two-minute tape Dr. Llewellyn had made of a half-dozen of his perfect pitches. Then if he made a bad pitch during a game, "I literally would not step back on the mound until I had pulled up that positive file in my mind," evoking what it felt like to throw well, Mr. Smoltz says.



Josh Anderson for The Wall Street Journal

To boost his self confidence during the recession, real-estate broker Tim Stowell, copied some tactics used by golfer Jack Nicklaus to improve the mental side of his game.

His confidence restored, Mr. Smoltz posted a 12-2 record for the remainder of the season and "never looked back," he says.

The psychological effects of a slump are similar in sports and work. The brains of athletes forced to watch videos of themselves losing resemble those of people who are depressed, which threatens to trigger further declines in performance, according to a 2007 study in the journal *Brain Imaging and Behavior*. Similarly, workplace studies show that employees who lose self confidence or think ill of themselves tend to perform more poorly than people with high self-esteem, in turn fueling added anxiety and depression.

Tim Stowell, a commercial real-estate broker for 25 years, used similar tactics when he began losing his self-confidence during the recession. "When you hear 'no, no, no,' enough times" while trying to lure new clients, "you start to question whether you've still got the right approach," says Mr. Stowell of Nashville, Tenn.



AFP/Getty Images

John Smoltz

Borrowing a tactic that he had read was used by golfer Jack Nicklaus to ward off anxiety, Mr. Stowell started visualizing himself performing well in the future, in his case client calls, and asked himself, "What is it that I'm afraid of? I'm playing well or I wouldn't be where I am."

Instead of criticizing himself in his head if he makes a minor error during a presentation, he laughs it off or ignores it. He also recalls his goal of helping clients save money, he says. Refocusing on what he likes about his job is helping him land more new clients once again, he says.

Mr. Nicklaus curbed tension on the golf course by stepping back for a moment to "consciously regain a positive frame of mind," says a spokesman for Mr. Nicklaus.

To help anxious clients, Dr. Llewellyn, of Marietta, Ga., has them list on a card their strengths, such as a great fast ball, then laminate and carry it. Baseball players often keep it in their back pockets and glance at it between innings, he says. Some coaches have business executives watch videos of good presentations they have made in the past. Other people develop rituals to clear their minds, such as golfers who shake off a bad shot by pulling up some grass and scattering it in the wind.



Getty Images

The pressure 'just overwhelmed me. I battled it and battled it.' Former Mets catcher Mackey Sasser, who lost his ability to throw the ball back to the mound.

Amateur golfer Greg DeRosa, Brookville, N.Y., says learning to stop dwelling on his mistakes on the golf course has helped him in business. During a slump as a golfer for Rollins College in Winter Park, Fla., his anxiety after bad shots triggered pessimism and more misses. When he practiced harder and took lessons, he lost the rhythm of his swing, he says.

He applied those skills when a restaurant he invested in started losing money. Says Mr. DeRosa, chief executive of a golf-course construction-materials business. "I was able to move on and say, 'Enough is enough. We're done with this,' " and sell the restaurant.



Jeff Swensen for The Wall Street Journal

Dan Di Cio, a Pittsburgh account executive, was falling short of his personal sales goals. He found inspiration in former Major League pitcher John Smoltz, who visualized perfect pitches to break out of his slump in 1991.

Sometimes, the causes of performance problems go deeper, and therapy is needed to heal past traumas, says David Grand, a New York psychotherapist and performance coach. In the middle of a successful career, Mackey Sasser, a catcher for the New York Mets from 1987 to 1995, suddenly lost his ability to throw the ball back to the pitcher, says Mr. Sasser, now a college baseball coach in Dothan, Ala. The pressure "just overwhelmed me," he says. "I battled it and battled it," but the problem ended his pro career.

Working with Tom Ferraro, a Williston Park, N.Y., psychotherapist who works with athletes and performers, Mr. DeRosa quit taking lessons and started telling himself, "I'm pretty good the way I am. I'm going to trust my instincts." Instead of beating himself up if his ball landed in the bunker, he cut his losses and settled for a manageable shot that would get the ball back on the fairway. And he remained optimistic, telling himself the game "would turn out OK," he says. He has trimmed three strokes off his average since college five years ago.

When the problem cropped up again in his work as a college baseball coach, Mr. Sasser began working with Dr. Grand. He realized he was haunted by past traumas—a difficult childhood and a hard hit at home plate by a fastball that broke his shoulder. Understanding how his suppressed fears had resurfaced and blocked his performance enabled him to throw again while coaching practices with his team, Mr. Sasser says.

Psychotherapist Dr. Ferraro says similar patterns crop up with his business clients. Robin McManus of Boston thought she put her difficult childhood and innate shyness behind her when she became a top-ranked home-improvement saleswoman. But when her boss received a letter from a customer complaining about her, those old fears resurfaced. The customer's complaints were irrational and unfounded, but she says she was "disturbed to the point where I was overcompensating and being extra hands-off."

Working with Dr. Ferraro, Ms. McManus says she learned to draw strength from past successes, telling herself, "I do know how to do this." She set new sales goals and planned to reward herself with a new pair of shoes or even a vacation. She learned that while old fears may resurface, "that doesn't define you. Instead, you remember all the other parts of yourself that are strong."

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Putting on Your Game Face

Some tips on recognizing and improving the mental side of workplace performance.

Causes of Slumps in Sports and Work

- Fear of repeating past failures
- Dwelling on past mistakes
- Loss of confidence
- Overthinking the next move or play and choking or freezing
- Overtraining in sports, burnout on the job
- Forgetting your original purpose or attraction to your sport or job
- Constant destructive criticism by a coach, fans or a boss
- Resurfacing of past fears arising from psychological trauma or injury

Techniques to Change Negative Thinking

- After a mistake or failure, refocus immediately on a past success.
- Visualize yourself succeeding on the next sale, meeting, play or game.
- Record and refer to your past peak performances, on video or in writing.
- List your strengths and assets and refer to the list in stressful moments.
- Turn off your mind and focus on step-by-step processes.
- Use rest or relaxation techniques such as deep breathing.
- Surround yourself with encouraging people.
- Develop rituals to focus your mind in the present moment.
- Recall the original purpose or attraction that drew you to your sport or job.
- Work with a psychologist or therapist to identify causes of performance blocks.

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HUMAN RESOURCES / ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR

Slumping at Work? What Would Jack Do

by: Sue Shellenbarger

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TOPICS: Careers

SUMMARY: Sports legends Jack Nicklaus and John Smoltz dealt with slumps in their long careers. But the same psychological hurdles trip up the rest of us, executives who aren't making their numbers or producing enough good work on the job.

CLASSROOM APPLICATION: Learning from other people's experiences is an important skill for employee development. This article demonstrates how employees can benefit from the experiences of professional athletes breaking out of slumps. Employee challenges such as losing confidence, making mistakes, and being anxious have similar to athletes experiencing slumps. Refocusing on successful situations and visualizing success is important.

QUESTIONS:

1. (*Introductory*) What can employees in a slump learn from the slump of a professional athlete?
2. (*Advanced*) What are the causes of slumps at work and in sports? Give three examples.
3. (*Advanced*) How can employees overcome negative thinking and break out a slump? Give three examples.

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