

The Real Secret to Winning: A Cool Head, Every Time

There's nothing more intimidating than coolness under pressure.



By Jason Selk *Author, Executive Toughness*



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It's truly intimidating to face someone who won't crack, whether it's a president or manager or pitcher. Most of us can summon up a memory of working with (or against) a person with icewater in their veins. There's a moment you realize you're getting rattled and losing ground, and they're not.

But that coolness is not innate. Even world champions have to work at it. If they don't, they will inevitably face that one time where they can't keep it together, and they crack. When they surpass their own critical threshold, the result is a meltdown -- and all it takes is one to stall a promising career.

Whether baseball season, tennis season or open season on your company, there are powerful methods out there for learning how to keep a level head, stay calm, and sustain the level of performance it takes to win.

Here are four effective strategies for keeping your cool, no matter what pressure you face:

Stay Playful

Serious winners aren't always gritting their teeth. I came across a compelling approach in a new book, *The Melting Point: How to Stay Cool and Sustain World-Class Business Performance*, by Dr. Christian Marcolli. Like me, he's a well-established performance coach whose roster spans business as well as sports. His A-list clients include Olympic gold medalists, sports icons -- a young, up-and-coming Roger Federer -- as well as C-Suite executives and managers in some of the world's most competitive organizations. What I call toughness, Dr. Marcolli calls coolness. Essentially, they're the same thing. The highly successful learn how to relax and dance, maintaining their creativity when others are shaking their heads. In deals that hit a wall, being able to think outside the box can defuse tense negotiations with the welcome surprise of a possible solution.

Don't Spread Yourself Thin

Successful high performers are the ones who don't spread themselves so thin they have no energy left. Being debilitated by taking on too many responsibilities and tasks can quickly trigger meltdowns. Learn how to delegate effectively to free up your attention for the tasks you can't leave in other hands. And learn how to close the door, training your team members that you, too, need time to focus.

Take Care of Yourself

You are your best asset. You are your own Thoroughbred. So why neglect your own care, rest and feeding? It's a myth that high achievers overdo it at the expense of their own health. Nothing could be farther from the truth. I have spent a lot of time coaching athletes who have no choice but to take their wellness seriously. For most, a good night's sleep is sacrosanct. Consider your bedroom a temple for high-quality sleep, and relegate the devices to your home office for the night. You'll wake up refreshed, with far more mental, physical and emotional energy for the day ahead.

Block Out Time to Monotask

Another performance myth is that high performers are better at multitasking. They're not. Actually, they're better at focusing. Researchers found that our performance deteriorates radically if we focus on any more than three things at once. It's called channel capacity. The best way to get something done, however, is just to do that one thing. Set up 1-2 hour time blocks in your daily schedule to handle the high priority tasks. Shut the door, and get to it. The added benefit is that you can effectively cross it off your list -- and get that motivating boost from knowing you accomplished it.

High performance is never a one-note Samba: it takes practice and commitment. For every victory there's going to be a loss. But the trick is to sustain a high level of excellence for the long haul. As you build the behaviors that protect your energy levels and improve your ability to focus, you will also gain a confident self-awareness. The more you face the pressure and stay cool, the more confident you can be about the next time. When the going gets tough, the tough get cool.