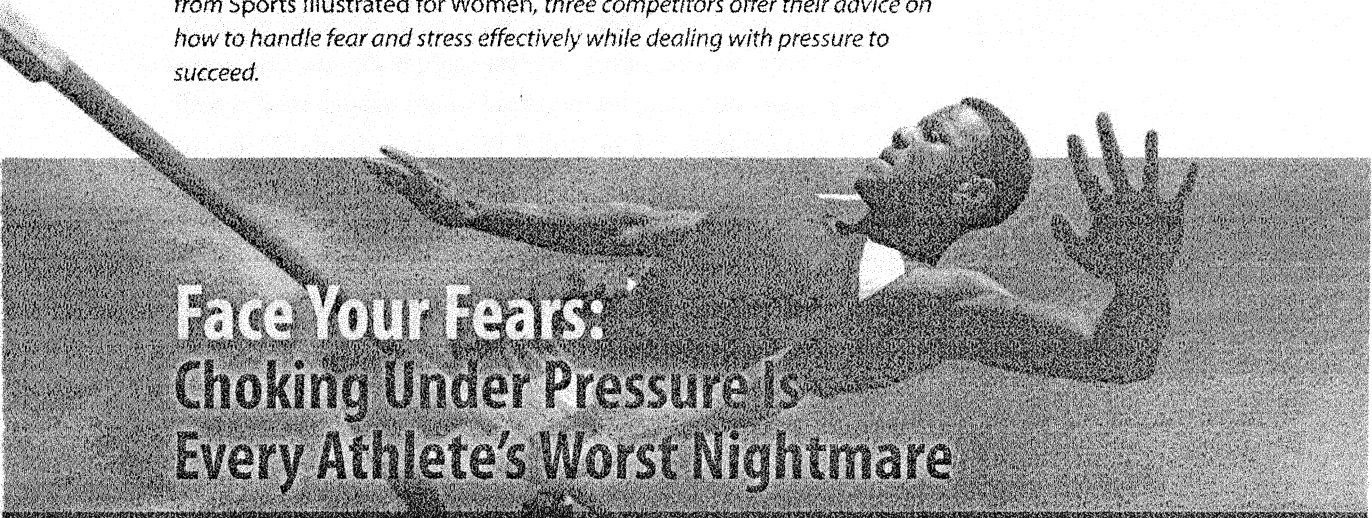


**Background** In athletics, choking refers to the failure to perform well during a key moment. For example, a golfer who misses an easy putt in the closing moments of a tournament is said to have “choked.” In this article from *Sports Illustrated for Women*, three competitors offer their advice on how to handle fear and stress effectively while dealing with pressure to succeed.



## Face Your Fears: Choking Under Pressure Is Every Athlete’s Worst Nightmare

Magazine Article by Dana Hudepohl

1. **READ** ▶ As you read lines 1–31, begin to collect and cite text evidence.

- In the margin, briefly explain what is happening in lines 1–7.
- Circle the key to Wilkinson’s victory and the reaction of the fans (lines 8–12).
- Underline details that describe Wilkinson’s experience at her first international meet.

CLOSE READ  
Notes

As she stood on the 10-meter platform at the Sydney Olympics, Laura Wilkinson knew she had to nail her fourth dive to clinch the gold. The pressure was intense: Head-to-head against the toughest divers in the world, she had to be flawless. “In a way I felt I was putting more pressure on myself than I could handle,” says Wilkinson, 23. “But I felt like I had nothing to lose. There are more important things than fear.”

- With that calm attitude, she aced her fourth and fifth dives and won the gold. Her upset victory (she went from fifth to first after three dives) stunned competitors and fans. The key to Wilkinson’s victory? Confidence, which was something she had worked on developing in her training.
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“When you push away your nerves and refuse to think about them, they come on full force at the most important time: right during the meet,” says Wilkinson. So, alone in her hotel room in Sydney, Wilkinson faced her fears the night before the final round of diving. “I let everything hit me: What would happen if I did well? What would happen if I did badly? What am I afraid of?” she recalls. “I was literally shaking just thinking about it, feeling scared and nervous. When I had the courage to stand up to what I was feeling, it didn’t seem so bad anymore. I was able to move on.”

Wilkinson knows what it’s like to get hung up in doubts and anxieties. At her first international meet, she says she was seized by a feeling of near panic. “I was afraid of embarrassing myself and [as a result] I just choked,” she says. It took her several meets to get over the experience, which sports psychologists say is not unusual.

“Every player chokes at some point—it’s a natural response to competitive stress,” says Todd Ryska, a professor of sport psychology at the University of Texas-San Antonio. “Athletes fear it most because of the stigma. No one wants to be the one everyone’s talking about in the locker room.”

### Find Your Focus

Choking is not a mistake out of nowhere like a shanked<sup>1</sup> golf shot; it’s usually the result of misplaced focus. Athletes who avoid choking concentrate on the process (what do I have to do right now?), which is

<sup>1</sup> **shank:** a golf term meaning “to accidentally hit a golf ball with the wrong part of the golf club.”

2. **◀ REREAD ▶** Reread lines 13–21. Wilkinson says confidence was the key to her Olympic victory. In the margin, list two details that support her statement.
3. **▶ READ ▶** As you read lines 32–51, underline the negative effects of fear and stress on Barb Lindquist at her first big meet.

a positive mental approach. Those who choke tend to dwell on the outcome (what will happen if I don't win?) and its potentially unpleasant **consequences**.

consequences:

Letting your attention wander can also lead to trouble. Barb Lindquist, who swam for Stanford from 1987 to 1991, recalls how she  
 40 felt at her first big meet (the U.S. Open) as she listened to the announcer reciting the accomplishments of her competitors. "I was 16 and I was next to a swimmer that I had read about. I got really flustered by hearing her accomplishments," she says. "I didn't concentrate on my race and was all shaky afterward. I finished last."

Now 31 and a triathlete,<sup>2</sup> Lindquist hasn't had any problems since then. While swimming, she repeats to herself the words "long and strong." On the bike she thinks about her pedal **technique**, and while  
 50 running she visualizes balloons pulling up her legs to make her feel light. "If you're thinking about each of those things along the way and pushing yourself, you can't really choke," says Lindquist, who finished 2000 ranked seventh in the world.

technique:

Once choking symptoms kick in they're difficult to stop. Libbie Hickman, 35, found this out when she was running the 5,000 meters at the '96 Olympic trials. Hickman led until the last 100 meters, when three runners passed her. "I remember thinking, I'm not doing it. I'm not going to make the team," she says. "As soon as you start focusing on the negative you're dead."

<sup>2</sup> **triathlete:** a person who participates in a three-part athletic contest, which generally includes swimming, biking, and running.

4. **◀ REREAD AND DISCUSS** With a small group, discuss the main ideas the writer presents under the heading "Find Your Focus." Include facts and examples in lines 32–37 and the specific experiences of Barb Lindquist in your discussion.
5. **▶ READ** Read lines 52–68. In the margin, summarize Hickman's experiences at the 1996 and 2000 Olympic trials.

What Hickman learned from that experience helped her at the 2000 trials. “I started getting passed in the last lap, and the fear of coming in fourth again jumped in my head,” she says. “But instead of letting that fear sit there, I threw it out, focused on the job that needed to be done and saw the finish line.” The result: She finished third.

perspective:

### It’s Just a Game

If you have a bad experience, keep it in **perspective**. “Not to minimize the importance of competition, but it’s still only a portion of life,” says Ryska. Your friends and teammates will still accept you even when you don’t perform up to expectations—theirs or yours.

“You have to look forward,” says Lindquist. “You only fail in a race if you haven’t learned something from it.”

6. **REREAD** Reread lines 63–68. Summarize the important idea under the heading “It’s Just a Game.”

### SHORT RESPONSE

*Cite Text Evidence* What is the central idea of this article? Review your reading notes, and **cite text evidence** that supports this idea.

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