

Reign in Your Nerves and Improve Performance: Pre-Game Routines

By Jennifer Lager, Psy.D.

[GAME – Get A Mental Edge](#)

Before the kickoff of each soccer game during the 1998 World Cup, French defender Laurent Blac planted a kiss on the shaven pate of goalkeeper Fabien Barthez. They won, and you can decide for yourself how much if at all the pre-game kiss contributed to their success. Some might call it superstitious, others, a routine which helped create consistency and reduce anxiety.

There is a great deal of uncertainty in competing. Having a pre-game routine is an important tool to cope with the nerves that are so common for soccer players and all athletes. It is not difficult, and it can assist you in achieving your goals. If you watch athletes across different sports, you will notice that many (dare I say most) demonstrate observable behaviors that represent elements of their pre-performance routines. Mia Hamm is reported to have had a routine of tying her right laces over her left when she puts on her shoes. A tennis player may bounce the ball a set number of times before serving. A baseball player may tap home base with the bat in a particular pattern before batting. What makes routines helpful is that they are stable and predictable. Being able to count on them when so many of the other factors of a meet (e.g. weather conditions, crowd influences, other players' performances) are different from day to day can be very comforting. Therefore, it is important to only include elements in your routine that you can reliably perform and control. Players can become superstitious about their routines, giving them more power than they actually have to control or predict outcomes. This can be dangerous, as evidenced by one game played by Ivory Coast's national soccer team member Kolo Toure. Toure's pregame routine requires him to be the last player from his team to walk onto the field. He once missed the start of the second half of an important game because he was waiting for a teammate to precede him. This is an example where having a routine that is not entirely within one's control can affect performance in a negative way.

While it is true that a large part of your routine will take place at the field, you can use them at other times as well. For example, eating a certain meal the morning of a competition can play a key role in one's pre-game routine. Packing your soccer bag in a certain order/manner to ensure all of your equipment is ready is another example. Your pre-game routine can also include listening to a certain song or type of music on your way to the field and while waiting for the game to begin.

There is another, equally essential, part of pre-game preparation that you can't see when observing an athlete – the internal routine that the athlete performs as he or she is preparing to compete. Internal routines can provide the confidence that you are prepared for whatever comes your way as the game begins. These routines can also be used at other times during the game, such as a time out or when you are preparing to make a player substitution and re-enter a game.

Visualization (or imagery) is one example of an internal preparation tool. It can be used effectively in the weeks, days, and hours before a game. It works because when you imagine yourself doing something, you are creating neural pathways in your brain, just as if you had performed it. These pathways can teach our muscles what to do come game time.

Carli Lloyd has spoken about her use of visualization in interviews and describes it as a contributing force in her success. Lloyd takes time for intense meditation before each game to visualize various positive scenarios between her and the ball. What does she mean when she calls them “intense”? The keys to effective visualizations are that they need to be vivid (use all of your senses to develop the scene in your mind), and that they need to occur in “real time” (meaning if what you are visualizing takes 2 minutes, then try to have your visualization of it take that long as well).

If you decide to include visualization in your pre-performance routine the night before a race, make sure to pick a time to stop. At this point, allow your thoughts to settle. Otherwise, this can be disruptive to your ability to get a good night of sleep, which is another important part of your pre-game preparation.



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