MAX EFFORT · RAPID RECOVERY

AUT-SPRINZ & NZSCA STRENGTH AND CONDITIONING / SPORT TECHNOLOGY CONFERENCE 2026

A PRACTICAL FRAMEWORK TO HELP ATHLETES PERFORM BETTER UNDER PRESSURE

The lens for today: How we interpret stress changes how we respond to it. A stress-is-enhancing mindset can promote more adaptive responses under pressure.

Crum, Salovey & Achor (2013), Journal of Personality and Social Psychology



THEO YOUNGER — INTEGRATED TRAINING

THE SET-UP

PRESSURE IS GUARANTEED

Sport manufactures pressure on purpose: finals, penalties, last lifts. When the moment arrives, the body up-regulates: heart rate climbs, adrenaline rises, breath quickens. That is mobilisation

SAME BODY READ AS **THREAT**

"Something is wrong with me."

Fight the surge: tighten, hesitate, spend attention on the feeling instead of the task.

SAME BODY READ AS **READINESS**

"My body is preparing to perform."

Ride the surge: the same arousal delivers oxygen, fuel and focus to the task.

Elite and non-elite athletes report the same intensity of pre-competition symptoms: elites read them as helping performance. *Jones, Hanton & Swain (1994), Personality and Individual Differences*

Athletes coached to reappraise arousal as a resource show healthier stress responses and better performance under pressure. *Jamieson, Mendes & Nock (2013); Moore et al. (2015)*

"Don't get rid of the butterflies, teach them to fly in formation." after Hanton & Jones (1999)

STEP 01 — THE BREATH

THE LONG EXHALE

The breath is the one lever on the nervous system athletes control directly. Slow it down and extend the exhale, and the parasympathetic brake comes on: bottom-up control that brings the head back online.

THE PROTOCOL

IN — 4 SECONDS, THROUGH THE NOSE

OUT — 8 SECONDS, SLOW AND FULL THROUGH THE MOUTH

Exhale about twice the inhale · repeat 3–5 breaths · under a minute to shift state.

Slow breathing reliably increases vagally-mediated heart-rate variability, a widely used marker of cardiac parasympathetic/vagal activity.
Meta-analysis of 223 studies — Laborde et al. (2022), Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews

The effect is in the exhale: at the same slow pace, longer exhales produce more relaxation and more high-frequency HRV than longer inhales.
Van Diest et al. (2014), Applied Psychophysiology and Biofeedback

Five minutes a day of exhale-weighted breathing reduced physiological arousal and improved mood more than mindfulness meditation.
Balban et al. (2023), Cell Reports Medicine

STEP 02 — SELF-TALK

CHECK THE VOICE

Once the body settles, attention becomes coachable again and what an athlete says to themselves next is a trainable skill that takes practice.

.48

average effect of self-talk interventions on sport performance, a moderate, reliable effect

Meta-analysis: 32 studies, 62 effect sizes — Hatzigeorgiadis, Zourbanos, Galanis & Theodorakis (2011), Perspectives on Psychological Science

REFRAME, DON'T SUPPRESS

Relabelling the surge beats fighting it: saying “I am excited” outperformed “calm down” for performance under pressure.
Brooks (2014), Journal of Experimental Psychology: General

TRAIN IT LIKE A SKILL

Effects are larger when self-talk is deliberately practised. Build the words in training, don't improvise them on match day.
Hatzigeorgiadis et al. (2011) — trained self-talk shows larger effects

MAKE IT THEIRS

One rehearsed mantra in the athlete's own words: short and concrete: “I’m ready.” “I’ve done this before” “I’ve done the work.”

THE FRAMEWORK

THE THREE-STEP RESET

Body first. Head second. Action third.

01

BREATHE

RECOVER

Three to five slow breaths, exhale about twice the inhale. The body comes off red-line and the head comes back online.

02

REFRAME

REFOCUS

Check the self-talk. Swap the story for a constructive one or use a rehearsed mantra. Attention gets one clear job.

03

RELEASE

LEAN IN

Unclench jaw, shoulders and hands. Keep the energy, drop the tension: the upregulation is fuel. Embrace it and go again.

TWO SPEEDS: full reset: 60–90 seconds between efforts, sets and rounds · quick reset: ~10 seconds, right before high pressure moments.

Applied synthesis informed by Laborde et al. (2022), Jamieson et al. (2013) and Hatzigeorgiadis et al. (2011).

THE PRACTICAL

FEEL IT. PRACTISE IT. COACH IT.

About ten minutes · open floor · no equipment · experience the framework under fatigue.

2:00 **ROUND 1 MAX EFFORT**
Alternate 20 s jump squats / 20 s burpees. No tools yet, just notice what fatigue does to breath, tension and attention.

1:00 **GUIDED RESET**
I'll coach you through the three steps: 01 five long exhales · 02 choose your line · 03 release the tension, embrace the stress.

2:00 **ROUND 2 MAX EFFORT**
Same circuit. This time you do the reset yourself the moment the round ends.

1:00 **RESET**
01 five long exhales · 02 choose your line · 03 release the tension, embrace the stress.

2:00 **DEBRIEF**
What changed between rounds? Where does this live in your programme — between sets, repeat sprints, pressure reps?



Rapid recovery: Theo Younger

The aim of this practical is two-fold:

Notes