



Just Breathe

By Chris Casteel

Imagine your performers in this situation...

They step onto the gym floor amidst a flurry of pre show excitement, expectations of their team mates and instructors, and last minute show changes. In the audience are friends, family, instructors, competitors and judges. They can hear the blood pumping in their ears, hearts are racing, and their throats are dry. Their mind is spinning with an overflow of information; don't forget to do this, remember to do that. If only there was an escape from this moment! Panic fills their body. How can they possibly go on?! Every muscle is tense as they wait for the sound of the announcer's voice to begin their performance.

As extreme as the above scenario may seem, some performers in our activity may experience anxiety very similar to the description. It is commonly known as stage fright or 'fight or flight' response. For some individuals this may be a type of nervous energy that happens prior to the performance and disappears as soon as they begin to perform. The feelings are manageable. In fact, these individuals may even be able to employ their nervous energy toward the betterment of their performance. However, there may be other performers in which this condition considerably hinders the success of their performance. In this case, they have not yet learned how to manage their nervous energy and harness it for their benefit. Left without help, it can become debilitating.

It is my hope that the following information can give you a few teaching tools that will enable your students to maintain power over their nervous energy before it elevates to an unmanageable state.

First of all, we need to know exactly what we are dealing with; it's the brain. More specifically it is the sympathetic nervous system. In regards to stage fright, it works like this: When a performer is experiencing feelings of anxiety, they are most likely giving over control to an imaginary enemy. Often times this imaginary enemy may be their own subconscious belief that they will not be able to perform to the satisfaction of anyone – especially themselves. But wait; there is a good guy in this situation – the parasympathetic nervous system. In this situation, your

goal should be to educate your students on how to enable and utilize this ‘good guy’ in an otherwise stressful situation.

The Importance of Breath:

As you teach your students how to be in a ‘zone’ of performance, breathing is topic that absolutely should come up. Consistent breath is what ties together the mind and the body. Without it, your students will not be able sustain high levels of performance. When attention is given to breath, performers will become anchored in the moment; both physically and mentally.

In the fight against stage fright – breath is your first avenue of defense. It will help to stimulate the parasympathetic nervous system to empower the individual. Take a quick moment and imagine yourself warming up your guard on the basketball courts prior to competition. You start to notice panic slowly ebbing into individuals on your team. It is important that you not allow this to infect your entire team. Depending on the age of your performers, panic can spread quickly. Stop the epidemic now and breathe!

- **Diaphragmatic Breathing:**

Have your performers hold their hands on their stomachs. They should be able to feel their stomachs expand as they inhale and contract as they exhale. Their back and sides should expand and contract as well. Take at least 10 large and slow breathes. This will enable their bodies to move more air in and get rid of stale air when they exhale.

- **Even Breathing:**

Have your performers breathe in and out for the same amount of counts. Example: Breathe in 1,2,3,4,5, Breathe out 1,2,3,4,5 (the number of counts really depends on how slowly you are counting). This will regulate breathing and create focus/relaxation.

Longer exhalations help reduce stress. So, in addition to counting the inhale and exhale for an even amount of counts, you may want to challenge them to exhale for longer counts than the inhale.

So, that’s the breathing part of the situation. Now let’s talk about slaying the stage fright monster prior to arriving at a competition site. As stated earlier, some of the overwhelming nerves may be associated with an individual’s lack of confidence in their ability. Considering this, instructors should combat this perception by making sure they establish a strong mind set in the rehearsal process.

- **Preparation:**

Use action in preparation to tackle anxiety. Simulate the competitive performance environment continuously in your rehearsals. Make sure that your performers know

everything that will occur at a competition – right down to mimicking the announcer’s script prior to the performance. Talk them through every aspect of the competitive day – leave nothing for self discovery.

Perhaps you can have an open rehearsal night where friends and family can come to watch the show. This will allow those students to acclimate in a ‘friendly’ environment prior to an actual tournament.

Take advantage of information posted on the WGASC site and utilize the facility maps found on the ‘Winter Guard Schedule’ tab to familiarize your team with the layout of the gym and surrounding areas. They should feel as comfortable as possible with the show site.

- Practice:

OK, I realize that as instructors we are an artistic and somewhat eclectic bunch that can be given to last minute changes in choreography and such. Try to refrain from this as much as possible if you have any individuals who struggle with performance anxiety. Save the changes for early in the week, giving plenty of practice time prior to the performance. Practice all aspects of the choreography as much as possible to establish a comfort and confidence in the show. New content/unrehearsed will only add to the anxiety level.

- Mindset:

This is a battle against negative self talk. Find a way to turn the mind rhetoric away from “I can’t do this!” to “**Yes I Can!**” On the flip side of this, the negative talk may also contain an inaccurate and negative perception of what individuals (audience members, judges) think of the performer. In both cases, encourage your performers to focus on what they would like to give in their performance. Positive imagery is an effective tool to use in this. Turn on the show music and have the performers close their eyes and visualize a perfect performance. Do this as many times as possible.

Really this is one of those areas that we teach in color guard from the perspective of the performance; however, its value transcends our sport and has real life application and significance. How awesome is it that we teach not only color guard skills, but we also have the opportunity to positively impact a life!

Until next week....Just Breathe.