

The game of cricket is often thought of as one of the hardest sports to understand. It's not hard, however, to understand what professional cricketer Allan Donald needed to do in the last minute of the 1999 Cricket World Cup semi-final between Australia and South Africa. Donald was a member of the South African team, and all Donald had to do was run 22 yards as quickly as possible when Donald's teammate at the other end hit the ball. Succeed, and South Africa would reach the finals. Fail, and South Africa would be out. Donald's teammate hit the ball, but Donald didn't run. First, Donald turned around. Then, Donald watched the ball, and then Donald dropped Donald's bat. Only after Donald dropped Donald's bat did Donald start to run, but after Donald dropped Donald's bat was too late and South Africa lost the match and was out of the tournament. "Donald's legs felt like jelly," Donald later said. "Having my legs feel like jelly was a dreamlike sequence, almost in slow motion." The Donald not running incident is one of the more famous examples of what is called choking in sports. In everyday life, choking means having trouble breathing when something gets stuck in your throat. In sports, however, an athlete chokes when the athlete underperform during a moment of great pressure; the athlete fail to do what the athlete normally find easy to do. When a professional golfer misses a simple shot on the last hole, missing a simple short on the last hole is choking. When a professional soccer player misses a penalty in a world cup final, missing a penalty in a world cup final is choking. So, what causes top athletes to choke and what can the rest of us learn from the things that cause athletes to choke?

Choking is, at choking's core, caused by anxiety. Anxiety is a natural part of professional sports, of course, but how athletes manage the natural part of professional sports anxiety is the key. If the athlete is afraid that failure will affect the athlete's status, then the anxiety can become overwhelming. At international soccer tournaments, teams with more highly respected and successful players are more likely to choke during a penalty shoot-out than teams with unknown players. Some sports scientists speculate that successful players being more likely to choke during a penalty shoot-out is because highly respected players fear losing that respect, and the fear of losing that respect causes more anxiety.

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Key vocabulary

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