

Bounce, Clutch and Choke

Bounce: Mozart, Federer, Picasso, Beckham, and the Science of Success
Matthew Syed, columnist for The Times of London and commentator for the BBC. Three time Commonwealth table tennis champion, two-time Olympian

Choke: What The Secrets of the Brain Reveal About Getting It Right When You Have To

Sian Bielock, Ph. D.

Associate Professor in Department of Psychology, University of Chicago

Clutch: Why Some People Excel Under Pressure and Others Don't

Paul Sullivan, writes "Wealth Matters" column for The New York Times

Why do some people perform well under pressure while others don't? Why do some bounce back from adversity or come through in a clutch while others choke? That is the subject of three books, each of which tackles the subject from a different angle. Each author has different credentials as well.

Sian Bielock is a professor who conducts research in this field. Matthew Syed, the author of *Bounce*, writes for The Times of London, is a commentator for the BBC and was three time Commonwealth table tennis champion and a two-time Olympian. Syed can speak from direct experience about performing under pressure. Paul Sullivan writes "Wealth Matters" column for The New York Times. So you have someone whose career studies performance, someone who performing at the world class level of table tennis and a financial columnist. As you can imagine each one looks at this issue a bit different and each author finds different reasons why we come through in a clutch or choke.

Bielock in *Choke* concludes that practicing under pressure enhances performance, even cognitive performance. She tells us the ability to control our thoughts and images play a crucial role. Bielock lists several tips to help us prevent choking such as reaffirming our self-worth, meditating, pausing before acting and reinterpreting our reactions. As an example of this last tip she encourages us to reframe a reaction such as "I am freaking out" about facing a challenge to "I am pumped for this test!"

Bounce also talks about the importance of practice. Syed draws on the research of Anders Ericsson, psychologist at Florida State University, who coined the term "deliberate practice." Ericsson noticed that world class performers practiced in a different way than others. "When most people practice, they focus on the things they can do effortlessly. Expert practice

is different. It entails considerable, specific, and sustained efforts to do something you can't do well – or even at all. Research across domains shows that it is only by working at what you can't do that you turn into the expert you want to become." Syed calls it purposeful practice. Why? "Because the practice sessions of aspiring champions have a specific and never-changing purpose: progress. World-class performance comes by striving for a target just out of reach, but with a vivid awareness of how the gap might be breached."

This emphasis on purposeful or deliberate practice parallels Bielock's recommendation to practice under pressure.

Bounce also ties in works I've reviewed here: Colvin's Talent is Overrated, Coyle's The Talent Code and Dweck's Mindset.

Syed introduces another term as well: doublethink. Unlike many writers who urge us to focus only on the positive, Syed tells us we need both positive and negative thoughts. We need a positive focus to protect our self-belief while also noting our weaknesses that need to be improved.

He also explains how our brain has explicit and implicit systems. When we learn a new skill we operate on the explicit, conscious level. As we become proficient and develop mastery of a skill the brain hands over the performance to our implicit, subconscious system. It takes thousands of hours of purposeful practice to cement a skill into an unconscious mode. We choke when under the intense light of pressure we try to push the skill back into the explicit, inherently slower and more error prone system. As soon as we start to try to consciously control something we had automatized we run into trouble and can choke. Golfers call this a case of the yips.

Sullivan's Clutch draws some general conclusions by using examples of high performers in various fields. He believes people who choke share three traits: 1. They don't take responsibility for choking, 2. They overthink what they're doing, and, 3. They fool themselves with overconfidence.

He then identifies five key traits of people who perform well: focus, discipline, adaptability, presence and being motivated by fear and desire. Sullivan's last trait is similar to Syed's recommendation to properly use both positive and negative thoughts.

So where does all of this leave us? Each book lays out somewhat different approaches. Are there common denominators? I think there

are. While none of the ideas appeared in all three books there were several that popped up in two of them.

1. Practicing purposefully and under pressure.
2. Proper use of positive and negative thinking.
3. Being fully in the present while performing. This allows us to focus on the outcome instead of worrying about how we going to get to our goal. However we need to sharply focus on technique during purposeful practice. The combination of these ideas helps us avoid over thinking and overconfidence.
4. We need to be adaptable and use judgment when applying our principles.
5. When performing we can lessen the pressure by telling ourselves we're not, say, serving for the winning game of the U.S. Open. We're just serving any other game.

If forced to choose one of these books it would be a tough one but I'd lean towards Bielock's Choke. I'd do so partly because her career is dedicated to learning why some people choke and why others don't and because she offers more practical tips. Having said that any one of these books will help learn how to perform under pressure.