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Bounce Back from Mistakes with 'The Flush'

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How do great skaters deal with pressure during competition? How do they regroup after making a mistake? A key to maintaining your "game face" during competition is to develop and use an effective mistake ritual. Athletes who maintain emotional control on the ice handle mistakes differently than those who lose emotional control.

All athletes have a ritual they use after making a mistake. How effective is your ritual? Does it allow you to bounce right back? Or does it cause the mistake to linger and impact the rest your routine?

Think about yourself for a moment. What do you typically look like right after you've made a mistake? Do your shoulders slump? Does your head drop? Do you shake your head and throw your hands in the air? What does your face look like? Do you roll your eyes? Where do you look? What is that little voice in your head saying? Do you say anything out loud?
Now think about some of the best skaters you know. How do they consistently handle mistakes on the ice? What do they look like? Do they maintain a look of confidence and determination, no matter what just happened? How would you describe them? What do you think they are saying to themselves?

Positive Coaching Alliance believes that all skaters need a "go-to" ritual when mistakes are made that helps them bounce right back and stay engaged in their routine. Let's take a look at how you can develop an effective mistake ritual.

1. Develop a Disciplined Physical Response
This refers to the way you carry your head and shoulders, the look on your face and your body language during the first two to three seconds after you make a mistake. Physically, you want to portray a strong, powerful and confident image, no matter what just happened. Acting the way you want to feel in that moment - confident and determined, will move you closer to actually feeling that way. Use your body language to control your emotional state. This means standing tall, shoulders back, chin parallel to the ground, and keeping your facial expression strong. If you want to feel confident and determined in the face of a mistake, you need to look the part.

A favorite PCA mistake ritual is "The Flush." We learned it from PCA trainer Mike Legarza, formerly the men's basketball coach at Cañada College in Redwood City, Calif. When a player makes a mistake, he makes the motion of flushing a toilet, which involves making a fist with one hand, putting his fist in the air and bending his elbow to bring his fist down. With this flushing motion, the mistake is flushed away and he can now focus on moving forward.

While the flush works well for hockey players, it is not very realistic for skaters in competition, where every movement is choreographed. It would look pretty silly to do a "flush" while skating to Swan Lake! A good mistake ritual for skaters is to squeeze your shoulder blades together and let the mistake roll off your back. On the other side of the coin, one of our trainers, Shannon Peck, used to press her middle finger to her thumb when she did a good jump or spin. It was a way she would pat herself on the back and say, "Good job!" This really helped Shannon's confidence and energized her to finish strong.

2. Develop a Disciplined Mental Response
What you say to yourself (even in the privacy of your own head) has an impact on how you feel. If

you obsess over a mistake and play it over and over again in your head, you are likely to skate tight and to repeat the mistake. Rather than focusing on the mistake, focus on the challenge of bouncing back. Talk to yourself in the language of challenge. Use your words and your thoughts to control how you feel. Mentally, you might say: "Come on," "Right back," "No worries," "Hang in there," "Next one" or "Make up for it."

3. Practice

If you want your new, effective mistake ritual to show up under pressure on game day, you better practice it during practice. If you don't, the odds are against you that it will be there during competition. New responses need time and practice to become automatic. Share your ritual with your coaches so they can help you reinforce your new behavior.

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