Athletes describe choking in sport as a dramatic, catastrophic and acute collapse in performance standards, when performing under pressure (Mesagno & Hill, 2013). It is unsurprising therefore, that choking has become a frequent topic of discussion among athletes, coaches, media and sports fans, and a phenomenon of interest to sport psychologists and researchers. Over the last decade, researchers have provided an increasingly detailed account of the antecedents and mechanism of choking, while also identifying situational and individual mediators that can increase an athlete’s susceptibility to choke (see Mesagno et al., 2015). More recently, such work has also informed a range of strategies that may prevent the choke from occurring (see Gripp & Mesagno, 2017).

If I was no good at sport, then I was nothing…To be no good at the sport I was no good at, life wasn’t worth living…” (p.482).

It’s hard to describe how that type of collapse makes you feel. Especially when you keep doing it over and over. I felt empty, angry…a failure… (After choking) I walked into the clubhouse…and drank (alcohol) …I got in the car and drove home. I was massively over the limit.

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Accordingly, we offer the following recommendations for practitioners working with athletes who are choking-susceptible. If an athlete is choking, they should:

1. Reflect on their/their choking experience with another individual (e.g. a coach/sport psychologist) who can direct learning and encourage constructive reflection.

2. Support an athlete to challenge/replace dysfunctional attributions post-choke with those that reinforce personal control over pressured performance.

3. A choking-susceptible athlete should enhance his/her resilience through mental-fortitude training (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2016;)

It’s no choke: the long-term consequences of choking in sport

Dr Denise Hill and Paul Gorczynski discuss the consequences of choking in sport on athletic well-being.

The golfer Rory McIroy choked in equally “spectacular” fashion during the 2011 Masters. He entered the final round with a four-shot lead, only to drop seven strokes in six holes, on route to a remarkable score of 80 (eight over) that would leave him tied for 15th place. While McIroy acknowledged the choke led to extreme distress, he used the experience as motivation, which informed improvements to his game (technical and psychological aspects). Thus, in contrast to Boswell, McIroy went on to win the next major of the year (US Open), where he asserted the choking event had acted as the catalyst for victory. Anecdotally, it does seem that the consequences of choking can be substantive, and hold the potential to be either destructive or constructive.

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It’s hard to describe how that type of collapse makes you feel. Especially when you keep doing it over and over. I felt empty, angry…a failure… (After choking) I walked into the clubhouse…and drank (alcohol) …I got in the car and drove home. I was massively over the limit. Though behaviour is inexorable… I doubt anyone would understand why I did it… It’s just a result of choking. The problem needed to be sorted out. Choking really damaged my self-esteem. Does that make sense?...I had this image of myself empty, angry…a failure…(After choking) I walked into the clubhouse…and drank (alcohol) …I got in the car and drove home. I was massively over the limit.