

Trying to Reset While the Body Remembers the Score

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To the Editor

Athletes are often told to “reset” after mistakes-to take a breath; let it go and focus on the next point. It’s good advice in theory, but it assumes that mental discipline alone can calm the body after the spike of stress that comes with failure, humiliation or loss.

In reality, those moments leave more than a fleeting mark. The body registers them-through changes in heart rate, breathing and muscle tone-and those signals don’t disappear just because we tell ourselves to move on. This physiological “echo” can keep an athlete’s system in a heightened state long after the triggering moment has passed, even when they feel composed on the surface [1].

That lingering activation matters. Sustained sympathetic tone can disrupt sleep, concentration and emotional balance, gradually contributing to anxiety, irritability or burnout. In my experience, many athletes aren’t aware that what they feel as tension or fatigue may reflect ongoing physiological dysregulation rather than mental weakness [2].

Sports psychology has historically focused on top-down cognitive control-imagery, reframing or mindfulness. These tools are valuable, but growing evidence from psychophysiology shows that bottom-up methods, such as slow, diaphragmatic breathing and heart-rate-variability training, can directly shift vagal tone and restore equilibrium after stress [3].

If we want to protect both performance and mental health, we should treat physiological regulation as core training, not an afterthought. Learning to manage the body’s response to pressure may be just as important as managing the mind’s.

Respectfully,

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