

## **Handling stress on the mat – What, me nervous?**

We have all been there, or if you are a newbie, you will soon begin a journey, that I guarantee, will lead you to some stressful experiences, to say the least. Remember, we truly don't know what we haven't experienced yet. Those things that we don't know can and will cause us stress. How can we not be stressed, since we fear something we haven't yet experienced? It can be downright scary!

Want the quick answer? For most of these stressful situations, it is merely a lack of pure mat time. It is very easy to fix...simply get more mat time!

I have taught classes for over 15 years for new wrestling officials, and in every class, I ask the group this question: If you had a choice of taking a jungle safari and going deep into the dark, dense, unknown jungle...would you pick a guide with 2 months experience or 20 years? Of course you will take experience every time and I bet, that the guide with 20 years experience is as cool and calm as they come when the predatory animals are ready to strike. Sort of the same as officiating wrestling isn't it? Those wild animals are merely coaches who are ready to strike at a moment's notice. When they sense weakness, or worse, if they sense fear and the referee is unsure and wavering, they will pounce. How do you keep them from pouncing? Be the expert. Know the rules and how to apply them better than anyone in the "jungle".

What is stress? One description is "a dizziness of reason". Another is the fear of dismal failure, or just the fear of making a mistake. We are, however, only human, and as Shakespeare once wrote, "to err is human, to forgive divine." Most coaches will forgive an error, but it won't be immediate and they don't tolerate many.

Time magazine recently did an article on "Why anxiety is good for you". I read it while coming back from officiating the Cliff Keen Las Vegas Tournament. That tournament can generate a bit of stress, but at that level, the referees tend, on the most part, to always get through it.

Anxiety is a very normal response to something that we perceive as a threat. Think having 2 Big Ten coaches sitting opposite each other, both schools ranked, with their wrestlers about to square off, who are also ranked. Sound a bit intimidating? Actually, for the experienced ref...not really. Look at the referees that do the D1 D2 or D3 nationals. Think they are intimidated by who is in the corner? Not at all. Are they acutely aware of the potential for trouble? You bet! Because of their experience and training, 99.99% of the time, they are able to respond quickly to situations, able to anticipate what may happen and then react appropriately.

I was asked one time after a televised match; do I do anything special before a big match? I said “Yes! I say a little prayer, ‘Lord, please don’t let me see something I have never seen before and please don’t let it happen on national TV!’”

All officials experience some level of stress and anxieties prior to and during a match. Their heart beats a little faster, they sweat a bit more, breathe a little heavier, and even since nerves become hypersensitive, the perception of pain is increased at times.

Many officials, regardless of the sport, quit early because they just can’t, or don’t want to put up with the stress and worry that officiating can and does bring. We all have asked ourselves at one point or another, “Why am I putting myself through this?” We do it because of various reasons: giving back to a certain sport, the love of the sport, or its part of some weird sadomasochistic thing in our personality. I vote for that one! I can’t tell you how many times early in my career I have wondered to myself, “Why am I letting myself get beat up through this?” Don’t worry...it does and will get better!

I have been in the middle of a tough match early in my high school career, and then later when I started to do some college matches, where everything is going wrong and I have started praying for a earthquake to occur (just a small one of course, but strong enough to stop this match!). But guess what? I got through it. Yes, I might have been bloodied and bruised when I walked off the mat, but I heal fast.

With the advent of sites like Flo Wrestling, You Tube, etc, everything we do is being filmed by someone. It might be ESPN, or The Big Ten Network or even just some Mom or Dad with their cell phone. Screw up, and it can go viral in a matter of minutes! Someone is filming everything you do. Remember that.

With experience comes wisdom. Personally I think that is the greatest gift any referee could obtain. The wisdom to understand what is occurring, how to handle it, when and how to react to this situation or that, etc. Without the experience to handle those things, we are naked in the water. We know the sharks are circling somewhere, ready to lunge and bite us in the butt. Through experience, wisdom enables us to swim in that vast ocean that we call a wrestling mat and not fear the sharks; for we know where they are and how to avoid their sharp teeth. Wear the knowledge and the expertise of the rules as your armor that no one can ever penetrate.

We truly learn from our mistakes. Problem is, generally, we have to make those mistakes first in order to learn from them. Reading a rule book is one thing. Applying what we have read is another. A friend of mine once said that a wrestling referee will make up to 500 different mistakes before they start to gain the confidence that they need. Well, start your count down and believe me, you better get a calculator some days!

If we are unable to grow and learn from our experiences, we will be miserable and we will not want to ever stick our toe in the “ocean” again. The real key is to take one period, one takedown, one scramble, one penalty at a time.

Once you see something for the first time, lock that information into your memory bank, so that once it occurs again, you can say “Hey...I instinctively know how to handle that!” We call that, simply, experience. It will come, I swear. Watch, listen, and ask questions of top officials. Get a mentor. Watch yourself on video. Even veterans need to watch themselves to make sure their mechanics are sound. Also, stick your toe in that “ocean” a bit at a time. Don’t take a full swan dive your first year or 3rd or 4th. Just getting into college is the same thing; pace yourself. Start out at the lower levels and learn your craft. Move on when YOU are ready. You will know when. It is a leap of faith, but, oh what a feeling when you finish that first tough match, with the tough spaghetti wrestling, the two coaches pounding you and calmly, and with purpose, walk off the mat with your head high. For, at that moment, you know in your heart, that you belong there, scars and all!



**About Frederick Feeney:** With 24 years experience, Fred is a widely respected wrestling referee in both high school and college. He is a member of the CDWOA, NWOA and is the President and Founder of the MSWOA. Fred was also a FILA official until he retired from FS/GR in 2007. He is a certified OHSAA wrestling instructor and has taught 2 classes a year for the past 15 years. He is a moderator on several popular wrestling discussion forums, and has written many papers and articles on the mechanics of officiating and some on the personal inside stories as to what officiating is really about. Fred's in-depth experience encompasses both scholastic and collegiate levels, having worked the prestigious NWCA National Duals, The Midlands, and The Cliff Keene Las Vegas Tournament. Fred also works matches in the Big Ten Conference, MAC Conference and OAC Conference matches. His post season work has included numerous OHSAA State Wrestling Tournaments, the Senior Nationals, multiple NCWA Nationals, multiple NAIA National Championships as well as 8 NCAA Division III Championships and 2 NCAA II Championship finals. Fred and his wife reside in Dublin, Ohio.