

PRINCIPAL'S ASSEMBLY MESSAGE: Friday 10th February 2017

One of the more pleasant aspects of my role as the principal is that I get to watch you boys play your various sports. This is not only a pleasure because I enjoy sport but also an opportunity to get to see and know you in a different context. As I was watching a very good performance by our basketball team on Wednesday afternoon in a game which they won comfortably, a few things came to mind. It was very noticeable that when the team was warming up without any opposition it was very easy for them to put the ball in the basket. Even with the free throws the conversion rate was very good. As soon as the match started it was a different story, the conversion rate was much lower, even for the free throws from a relatively short distance.

This got me thinking about why players can have such a high conversion rate when they are practising and struggle in the match situation with exactly the same skill. This is not unique to school players only; the legendary Michael Jordan only had a conversion rate of 83% for free throws in his career. That means that the best player in the world misses every 1 in 5 of his throws.

This does not only apply to basketball players, I have watched water-polo players missing penalties from 5 meters away, sometimes missing the goals completely. In hockey and rugby I have often seen the same result with very easy conversions or penalties which a player would convert 90% of the time in practice. How many of you have rolled in long putts on the practice green and then missed 2 footers in competition? I certainly have!

Why is this? It is really quite simple, it is all about anxiety caused by pressure and how we cope with it. The pressure we put on ourselves or the pressure put on us by teammates, opposition, coaches and parents all contribute to this anxiety. When we are in a pressure situation our body releases adrenaline and produces the hormone cortisol. This causes symptoms like a quickening pulse and rapid breathing; you are ready for "fight or flight". This reaction might help you in a situation where you have to defend a 5 meter scrum, when you need the adrenaline to be pumping, but not in a situation where you need to be calm, cool and level headed.

I have two suggestions for you – and this applies not only to these sports but anything that we practise again and again only to fail in pressure situations. Firstly, ***put yourself under pressure when you practise*** – imagine tough moments, get your teammates to put pressure on you and practise slowly closing them out, blocking off their influence. Practice how you need to perform – under pressure.

Secondly, when we are excited, when we are in a happy place and bursting with energy, our body releases adrenaline and cortisol – exactly the same hormones as when we are under pressure. So, ***instead of thinking about how much pressure we are feeling, think about how much excitement there is*** and how happy you are to be in this special moment. This simple tool of telling your brain that your feeling of pressure is actually excitement and anticipation can change your outlook and change your performance. While the body produces exactly the same two chemicals, you can have an influence on the effect of these chemicals by using the

power of the mind to overcome what the body wants to do. Look at any top sportsman's interview before they compete – not one of them says they are nervous, they say they are excited, keen to go. They are consciously blocking the negative effects of the chemicals in their bodies.

These two simple manipulations of the mind - *to tell yourself that nervousness is actually excitement and looking for the opportunities instead of the hindrances* may just make a difference in your sport, and indeed this can be applied to all pressure situations – your music, your tests and exams. Next time you have a Maths test be excited and positive about it and you will see the difference in your result for sure!