



# Learning and Pressure

## Understanding the Context of a Lesson

For every topic instructed, the student is learning within a context. There are many factors to that context but none more important than the level of **pressure** during the various stages of development. Every coach has encountered this in their careers, most typically when trying to figure out why the team can do it in training but not in the match. Others have seen hints of it when championship or rivalry games are “won ugly” or why teams can perform with expertise, consistency and precision in the build-up but turn chaotic and inconsistent in the final third. There is a psychological component to it for sure, but more important than that is an awareness of this context of pressure by the coach and how to observe it, manipulate it, simulate it and progress an athlete through it.

For the remainder of the discussion, let’s set the framework for which we will view a player’s performance and progress through lessons with the following precepts:

- 1) The level of pressure is the context for every lesson learned. A scale of 1-10 is used with 1 being quite relaxed, almost subdued and 10 being extreme pressure, borderline collapse.
- 2) Learning a skill or concept at one level of pressure is in no way to be considered having learnt that skill at a different level of pressure. They are, in fact, two different skills, only vaguely related to one another, but still definitively different. For example, a scissors: level 2 is different from scissors: level 3.
- 3) Only an individual student can learn-there is no such entity as a “team”. A team is simply a collection of individuals and concepts like “teamwork” are actually an individual skill of how to integrate with players immediately around me working towards a common goal by assessing situations similarly and agreeing on various solutions or attempts.
- 4) Sequencing is the primary tool used to accurately identify the various forms and rates of deterioration within the student.
- 5) Every student has a Comfort Zone, a Growth Zone and a Collapse Zone. Differing levels of perceived pressure have a strong bearing on what exactly this is for each student. Similar environments can elicit different perceptions and experiences on the part of the student, to it is imperative the instructor can differentiate these zones and manage them accordingly for the individual needs of the student.

The effect of context is easy to explain in terms of differences and nuances within an athlete’s **cognitive capacity**. With this understanding, you can begin to help the student progress from one level of understanding or execution to another. As the challenges to a player’s performance nears their cognitive capacity, their performance begins to deteriorate. This deterioration can manifest itself gradually or rapidly and often times the differentials of this deterioration are what we use to both identify the problem and prescribe it’s possible solutions. These moments will help define the current range of the student’s development zone.

As with all MiSA lessons, a student should work on accuracy first, and speed second. Speed is the addition of pressure. This could be additional pressure on the neural pathways to execute the correct visual-mental-physical sequence for hard-skills, accurately in progressively shorter amounts of time, or it could be the faster execution of the player’s **ORCA** (Observe-Reflect-Choose-Act) process in a visual-mental-physical sequence for soft-skills. In our previous example of a scissors move, for the still developing athlete, the decision to apply the scissors move would be a **soft-skill**. The

execution of the scissors move would be the **hard-skill**. In the earlier stages of development, when the processes are still quite cognitive, the entire sequence (soft-skill to hard-skill) is being executed under the direction of alpha-waves from the brain. In a mature athlete, it is possible for these tasks to be executed through beta-waves and under progressively higher contexts of pressure. Ironically, the conversion of alpha to beta wave control is not by “thinking less”, but rather “thinking more”. Many times a coach may feel it is appropriate to offer the advice that the athlete is thinking too much, operating off an inherent belief that playing instinctually is better. While beta-wave control has a faster synaptic execution rate, it is not achieved by mimicking the state, but rather by exceeding certain thresholds of thoughtful repetitions. Thus the way to think less, is actually to think more.

### Understanding the Context

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----

So how can a coach use the context of pressure to increase performance and slowly mature the player into beta-wave directed performances? It starts with awareness. Above is the scale of pressure reference guideline. The reason we say guideline and not rule is that each individual is different and therefore each team is different. The absolute threshold of each category of pressure can vary, but the relative relationship between categories typically remains the same.

### Laboratory Pressure

The first category of pressure is called **Laboratory Pressure (LP)** with Levels 1 and 2 and they are typically unopposed drills where students are asked to visualize that cones or mannequins are simulating positional aspects of opponents. The perceived pressure is very low. These exercises are good for working on sequencing accuracy, but typically have a low transfer to matches because the skills are accurate, but at pressure levels 1 or 2.

### Match-Simulated Pressure (MSP)

The second category of pressure is called **Match-Simulated Pressure (MSP)** with levels 3, 4 and 5. This is where opposition is introduced but in a controlled manner that is usually a subset of the larger match. Small-sided games are an example of this. The pressure context is higher and when managed correctly, the rate of choices in the ORCA loop are significantly higher. These drills can be highly valuable or borderline useless, depending upon the instructor’s command over the concept of sequencing. Because there is a high-rate of ORCA loops, there is a high-rate of imprinting, or formalizing of sequences. If those sequences were accurate, then it is a positive experience and adds to the likelihood of success at later levels. If those sequences were inaccurate, then they also will formalize inaccurately (forming bad habits) and the extent to which the instructor allows the sequences to solidify without correction could delay as those must be replaced at a ratio of 3:1 by the correct sequencing to be successful at the next levels of pressure. This category is the most influential to a coach’s overall success with a student because of the possibility of maximize repetitions of accurate sequences. At the higher levels of this range of pressure are what we call “familiar” competitions, or scrimmages. This could be inter or intra-team but the key ingredient is the familiarity with the opponent and challenges to be presented.

### Standard Match Pressure (SMP)

The third category of pressure is called **Standard Match Pressure (SMP)**. This is the typical competition against an opponent that supplies no particular emotive response. This could be a generic league match, or a non-familiar or less-familiar tournament stage opponent. The types of expected challenges are generic and non-threatening. The levels of pressure can include 6-7 or 6-8 and must be determined on an individual basis by the instructor.

### High Match Pressure (HMP)

The fourth category or pressure is called **High Match Pressure (HMP)** and typically either includes levels 8-10 or 9-10. These are particularly emotive-prepped matches, like a derby or rivalry or a championship match. These matches do not come along as often and offer a unique opportunity for the well-prepared instructor. Depending on the goal and method of the instructor, these pressure levels can be utilized, manipulated, altered or all of the above. The correct strategy will be primarily dependent upon knowing his or her students well. Often times, in regular games, players only experience this level of pressure when they are within 20 yards of their goal or 20 yards of the opponents. This is one reason it is imperative that coaches use these areas of the field not to raise excitement levels, but to minimize them so that players can develop in this rare to experience context of pressure.

## **Learning Level Progression**

Since we are talking primarily about developing athletes, the goal is to help the student make what was once a level 3 type of pressure, gradually move to a level 2, if not a level 1. The more an athlete can move a task down the scale of pressure, the less adrenaline is introduced to the process and the more accurate and consistent the decisions and executions of those decisions will become. This will also allow and encourage the student to absorb greater and greater levels of pressure from his or her opponent and still be able to metabolize it effectively.

For every skill or concept, there is typically a level at which the ability will degrade or altogether disappear. This information is vital to an instructor as breakdowns at different levels will manifest themselves differently. How and when an ability degrades will greatly effect the solution and method of resolution. An unknowledgeable instructor could waste many interactions with the students chasing shadows, which further introduces barriers to learning (frustration, loss of confidence, etc). These breakdown thresholds are critical for the developing athlete and must be engaged routinely to keep checking the changing environment of the student. This is why we say for both the coach and the athlete to truly have success they cannot just simply remove the fear of failure (although this is a big hurdle and stops most students from realizing their potential). They must go beyond to where they embrace failure as an integral part of the student's development and engage it rigorously and without hesitation-each successive time making the experience less and less emotive for the athlete. This effectively redirects energy that athlete once used for nerves, stress, jitters, fight or flight etc and can redirect it all into problem-solving.

So how does a coach use this information? The best ones start by applying it to themselves and watching others, finally they listen to someone talk about it. We are all made from the same basic mold. 1 attempt is greater than 1000 observations, and 1 observation is greater than 1000 speeches. To understand it, you have to learn it. Adrenaline is the natural response to pressure (whether it drives you to fight or flight), and that response needs to be controlled for decision-making to improve. Realize, coaches, you are just as susceptible to pressure as your students are. You have the added pressure of being someone they are observing, as well as listening to so even though your input has less power than what they do, while they are honing what they do, your visual guidance and words have influence. If you want your students to maintain a high level of thinking under elevated moments of pressure, then you better demonstrate it for them visually in your responsibilities. The manner in which you communicate should reflect what you are trying to elicit. Now before you think I am a disciple of the coach sitting quietly at every game, let me interject with this thought: I think the coach should demonstrate what he or she is trying to elicit in his or her students. There may be times where artificial pressure is appropriate for the lesson. There may be times where passion and conviction are the lesson at hand. What I am arguing for is the intelligent and knowledgeable application of presence to visually demonstrate the lesson at hand. It is up to the coach to have determined what that pathway of lessons should be, and it could (and probably should) be different for different students.

## **Sequencing, Flooding and Incremental Success**

Once a degradation or collapse occurs for a student, the instructor must identify the earliest stage in the sequence where the degradation occurs. The reason for this is that it is that moment that the process began to be garbage in-garbage out. Many coaches misidentify this specific point of breakdown and a cycle ensues: the problem is not corrected, failure continues and a breach of confidence and/or trust is introduced. This now becomes a new barrier to

continued development for the student and is one that could have been minimized or avoided by accurately approaching the original problem.

Once the sequencing problem is identified, it must be noted at which level and/or stage of pressure it occurred. The manner and level in which the degradation begins, will be helpful to the instructor when choosing the method for resolution. There are two typical approaches with variations to each theme. The first is flooding and the second is incremental success. Flooding would be to duplicate the level of pressure and subject the student to repeated applications of that context in an effort to minimize the effects of adrenaline over time. This is much like a drug-addict needing a stronger drug because the original drug no longer has the same effect, just in the case of our athlete, the repeated exposure is hoped to diminish the effects of adrenaline. The second technique is to introduce a series of incremental successes, particularly in terms of the context level of pressure. This is accomplished by dropping back to a level of pressure where the task can still be accomplished accurately and then begin to artificially augment the lower pressure environment to simulate the higher-pressure context. If, for example, there was a failure at level 5, the context of the next few sessions could be level 4 with artificial manipulation (time, space, standards, expectations, method of asking for the lesson, consequences, etc). This has come to be known as the 4.5 level practices (level 4 structure with artificial pressure introduced by the coach). Both methods can be effective. Think of the problem as a locked door and each approach is a separate key ring of similarly crafted keys. Some doors will open for keys from one ring, and some for the other. Get the approach identified first and then begin to work through the multiple iterations of the approach. If you enjoy problem-solving yourself, you will enjoy the challenge of solving this problem for the individual. There are a hundred ways to perceive the same fact and another 100 reactions to each of those perceptions. Can you solve the riddle? Over time, you will gather more and more ability to both identify and resolve scenarios for athletes, but it will be an unending journey as a coach and one that you begin to eventually cherish if this is going to be a truly long-term endeavor for you.

## So what is the process?

Quite simply, go through your **ORCA loop** as a coach. **O**bserve a moment in the game or training. **R**eflect to see if it is consistent with or does it deviate from your understanding of sequencing, and if so, where, when and how? Next you must **C**hoose your path of instruction and all the nuances that go with it. Finally, you must **A**ct out your solution.

1. **Observe.** Everything starts with an observation, or a feeling. Confirm your hypothesis through sequencing to see if you have truly identified the source of the deficiency or strength. Write down, in detail every step your brain would process, in order, to complete a successful ORCA loop of the concept or skill you are observing.
2. **Reflect** on what just happened and identify the earliest deviation to the loop as well as the immediate and background context of pressure for the deviation (training, match, rivalry, etc). A word of warning: this may require a conversation with the child and they do not necessarily have the most refined skills for articulation. If they are additionally concerned that their answers have consequences other than the discovery of truth, they may not be entirely forthright with you, making your task more difficult again.
3. **Choose** the best instructional course of action based upon your conclusions drawn from the intersection of your observations and reflections. Your course of action should address two primary areas: the first is where did the breakdown the athlete's ORCA loop occur and will your subject material address this? The second is your determination for which pressure context progression you are going to go with, flooding or incremental success? If flooding, how will you monitor? If incremental success, what artificial elements of pressure will you introduce? How will you decide if it is working or failing? At what point will you re-evaluate your approach vs stick to your guns? Pre-plan these criteria because you are almost certainly less emotional now, than in the moment where your approach is not working and your answers were "wrong".
4. **Act** out your plan. Put it into action and begin to monitor because at this point, you only have a hypothesis. Do not treat it as though you have a solution yet. You have an educated hypothesis that still needs to be tested and confirmed or rejected. There is less emotion when you are testing a hypothesis vs providing a solution. You

have more room for flexibility and you are equally looking to prove or disprove your theory, whereas solutions tend to invoke biased observations towards confirmation. If your goal is accuracy, you don't need to be right, but rather flexible and open enough so that in moments where you are wrong (and there are a lot of them) you have the ability to make the correction quickly. I am always telling coaches that you should love being wrong, but hate being wrong for any extended period of time. Essentially, you put your action into play and begin the process all over again by observing your students metabolize the new input.

## **Summary**

This approach has a lot of hidden strengths, both for the student and the instructor. Currently, most methods put a lot of pressure to be right from the very beginning, which in turn creates a discomfort with failure as it implies a negative trajectory. When a coach is constantly introducing an educated hypothesis, but then immediately begins evaluating anything introduced, there is not as much pressure on being right, but rather on adjusting quickly, accurately and consistently. This mentality then encourages the incorporation of failure into the overall process because you do not have to fear failure when you are confident in your ability to detect it and adjust quicker than anybody. In fact, as you begin to convince yourself of this, you are now open to embracing failure as an integral part of the process. If you believe in the full potential of experiential learning, you have to embrace "failure" as a natural an integral part of the process. Once it is seen this way, by both the instructor and student, the capacity to learn increases exponentially.