

## The Psychology of Free Throws

The Utah Jazz were prepared to do something unprecedented in the NBA: hire a full-time sports psychologist. It was 1980 and Keith Henschen had one more question for the Jazz before he accepted an offer from the organization.

“Can I have an unlimited credit card?” he asked before exiting his interview.

The Jazz recruiting staff was perplexed.

“Excuse me?” they asked, like tight-budgeted parents letting their teenager loose at the mall.

Henschen, who holds a Ph.D. in sports science from the University of Indiana, explained that to perform at his highest capability, he needed to separate himself from not just the coaching staff, but the Utah Jazz, entirely. Sports psychology, in Henschen’s eyes, was less about connecting to yourself and a goal, but more about disconnecting from the game.

So why the unlimited credit card?

After spending thousands on meals, Henschen and the Jazz credit card had solved Karl Malone’s free throw shooting woes.

Over Utah’s finest BBQ, Henschen and the 6’9” power forward dug deep to find what Malone valued the most in this world. To nobody’s surprise, it was his wife and baby. And so the career 45% free throw shooter employed a heartfelt mental tool to his free throw routine. Before every attempt, Malone would say, “This is for Kay and the baby.” Eventually, he finished his career as a 75% shooter from the line.

And such is the power of sports psychology.

In sports, we often forget the human side of athletes. As journalists and fans, we romanticize superstars, glamorizing their dunks and venerating our favorite quarterbacks. But what lies underneath all the showmanship, the gravity-defying feats, the elegance is the same thing we find in ourselves: a vulnerable mind. That mind can be weak, falling prey to all kinds of mental hurdles. Anxiety. Insecurity. The inability to focus. All these factors, some making their presence felt more than others, parade themselves in athletic competition, altering outcomes, confidence, careers, and even the amount of money the Utah Jazz are forced to spend on BBQ meals to feed their franchise player.

It's 2018 now, and Karl Malone's playing days are long over. These days, centers now are not only expected to be consistent from the free throw line but from the three-point line as well. However, in a league with 7-foot centers launching shots from beyond the arc, one player possesses the traditional 'big man' skillset but has fallen behind in the age of centers living beyond the arc.

For the majority of his career, Dallas Maverick Center Deandre Jordan was notorious for his poor free throw shooting. He was a regular on TNT's *Shaqtin a Fool*, often missing free throws so miserably that he could probably hear Shaq's deep, thunderous laughter pounding through his head after an airball.

But something changed for the 6'11" center this past offseason. Suddenly, Jordan became something he had never been in his basketball career: a reliable free throw shooter.

He once shot an abysmal 37% from the line. But the 2018 season began with Jordan knocking down nine of his first ten free throws.

It had to be a fluke, right? Wasn't it too small of a sample size? What can 10 free throws tell you?

If it had been a fluke, we wouldn't have seen the beaming smile of Mavericks rookie Luka Doncic as he insisted that Deandre Jordan take a technical free throw only a few weeks into the NBA regular season. But we *did* see Doncic and the rest of the Mavericks bench smile from ear to ear as Deandre Jordan, for the first time in his NBA career, was chosen by his teammates to take a technical free throw.

Though his shot caught nothing but iron, he was met with a standing ovation from the Dallas faithful. It felt as though the now 75% free throw shooter had figured it out.

But when asked what he's doing differently, Jordan maintains that he's doing nothing, literally.

When asked by reporters what he'd done to improve his free throw percentage, "Nothing," said Jordan. "Just reps."

But to a sports psychologist like Trevor Cote, a psychology professor at Boston University, "nothing" doesn't satisfy the truth of what is going on with Jordan and his perplexing free throw shooting situation.

"The three most important aspects of free throw shooting could likely be developing a routine, visualization, and progressive muscle relaxation," Cote says, offering a drastically different explanation than Jordan's "nothing."

But Cote didn't stop there. He explained that there could be other aspects of Jordan's routine that may even be unknown to him.

And as it turns out, he was right.

Upon closer examination, Deandre Jordan has been doing two things differently this year than in the past. If you look closely at game tapes, it reveals some new developments. After Jordan gets fouled, he grabs the ball, sometimes wrestling it away from an opponent. Then, once he's at the line, he starts chattering with teammates. From the tapes, it looks like talk about defensive matchups. You got him? You good? No shooting tips. No hardcore strategizing. Just basic basketball stuff, the kind of stuff that keeps your mind preoccupied, the kind of stuff that saves you from overthinking something like a free throw.

"It could be this idea of self-talk that is allowing him to maintain a mental routine," Cote says.

But the aforementioned inner-mechanisms of the human mind exist as dichotomies, which means for every triumph in free throw shooting, there is a failure.

Just take a look at the bewildering situation in Philadelphia with the 76ers No. 1 draft pick, Markelle Fultz. The 6'4" guard from The University of Washington had promise written all over him as a freshman in college. Fultz drew comparisons to James Harden and other combo guards. He came into the league with a promising skill set, ranging from shooting, to pick and role and defense.

But while Deandre Jordan's free throw woes turned to cheers, Fultz's shooting from the line went from reliable to repulsive. Then it went from repulsive to reluctant, as Fultz began to spend time away from the team.

Time spent in the gym became time spent in the doctor's office. The 76ers and their fans were baffled over why their prized pick could no longer shoot the ball. Fultz tried all sorts of shooting routines, but to no avail, as his percentages fell below the 50% mark.

Eventually, he was diagnosed with neurogenic thoracic outlet syndrome, which is a disorder in which Fultz's nerves from his back to his shoulders aren't lining up properly.

But in a scenario like this, it's hard for a sports psychologist to not bring up the four letter word that no athlete wants to hear: the "yips."

The dreaded yips are every athlete's nightmare. New York Mets catcher Mackey Sasser became notorious for throwing lollipops back to the pitcher when he woke up one day and couldn't throw the ball with any type of velocity. Even four-time All-Star pitcher Jon Lester seemingly forgot how to throw the ball to first base and went as far to try bouncing the ball on one hop after fielding a ground ball. According to Cote, the sports phenomenon that makes it difficult for pitchers to throw the ball over the plate and prevent basketball players from shooting free throws successfully can be attributed to four factors: overthinking, losing touch on how to do something, fear of judgment from others, and a feeling of isolation.

The end result? No confidence.

For the same way Chick Knoblauch forgot how to throw the ball to first base, and the same reason Rick Ankiel relegated himself to the outfield despite being a promising pitching prospect, Markelle Fultz may have become the latest victim of the yips, losing his shooting touch along the way.

But Cote knows there is a solution. Players can work their way out of these mental slumps. "An athlete can utilize self-talk through self-compassion," Cote says. "Give yourself a

level of kindness from what you want to hear in times of adversity.” Self-talk in sports psychology refers to the idea that athletes can consciously or subconsciously talk to themselves during a competition to improve their focus.

Though for legal purposes he had to keep his name a secret, Cote recalled a time where a soccer player was struggling to maintain focus on the field after losing his father. Cote was working with the player and asked him, “If your dad were watching, what would he say?”

The soccer player, whose name can’t be revealed because of patient privacy laws, replied, “That mistake doesn’t make you a bad player.” And after a brief pause, he added, “I love you.”

Such was the solution for the soccer player.

But even in the most violent sport, our country has fallen in love with, the power of sports psychology, specifically self-talk, exists.

This year, the Buffalo Bills have employed the “man on the couch,” strategy, in which one veteran player each week will stand up on the couch in the locker room and share a deep fear that he has. Cote says the goal here is simple, “They need to get gushy. What makes them weak at the knees? Self-compassion is a reliable tool.”

For now, however, Fultz remains in the midst of a battle to regain his confidence and focus. It may be a long journey back for him, but Cote reminds us it’s doable through compassion.

There are many routes the promising point guard can take to become the player the 76ers organization wants him to be. But it’s been psychologically proven that finding love and acceptance will help in maintaining a mental routine, which leads to confidence and ultimately,

improved free throw shooting. So maybe finding a friend to talk to would be the first step in changing Markelle Fultz's career. Who knows? Only he can find out.

Perhaps Karl Malone is a great place to start.