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# The Yips And Its Impact On Athletes

## Abstract

Athletes have struggled over the years with the pressure of having to deliver results in competition during crunch time. Many have succeeded, and many have failed. It is not uncommon for superstar athletes to fail and continue to see success during the course of their career. Take Michael Jordan for example, he missed over 12,000 shots over the course of his career yet he is considered the greatest basketball player of all time. On the other hand, there are those athletes who struggle with high pressure situations and fail to deliver results. They lose focus, their mechanics are off and they can no longer compete at a high level. The most common cause of this is called the yips or focal dystonia. Findings suggest that there is a connection between the message the brain sends and what the body part is receiving thus causing the athlete to miss a target they would usually hit.

## Introduction

Ever wonder what goes through the mind of an athlete who is competing on the world's biggest stage? The game is on the line, the pressure is mounting, and the next shot, pitch, or pass decides the outcome of the game. These are the types of moments athletes work hard and routinely practice for. They go through pre-game rituals and have developed the physical mechanics to execute the play with precision yet, something triggers a systematic malfunction and transfer of information from the brain to the body part delivering the ball. The athlete can no longer shoot the ball or throw the strike with accuracy. Lack of confidence sets in and the athlete is now on a quest for answers. A number of professional athletes today suffer from an anxiety disorder called the yips. Over time, the yips have resulted in the inability for a professional athlete to compete at a high level and through therapy and medication, athletes have been able to reverse the effects of the yips.

## Method

Growing up having played baseball, it was a game that I really enjoyed and had a passion for. I would spend hours at home throwing tennis balls off the wall and catching them. My natural position was shortstop and I was always recognized for my strong arm. Throws to first were routine plays and I could literally throw to first on target with my eyes closed. As I grew older and the game became more competitive, I recognized the feeling of anxiousness, butterflies in my stomach. I would still power through the game, however; I started to commit more throwing errors in the process. No injuries, slippery baseballs, nothing, just plain missing the mark. Ultimately it became too much, and I stopped playing altogether. Years, later I recall turning on the television and watching a young promising pitcher pitching for the St. Louis Cardinals by the name of Rick Ankiel. He was a phenom and one of the most talented pitchers at that time. He was one of the hardest throwing lefties in the game when it happened; he could no longer throw strikes. As a result, his pitching career was over. It peaked my interest as I felt a connection with what had occurred with Rick. I followed Rick's journey which included a major league comeback at a different position and ended with a long successful career. At some point,

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between Rick's downfall as a pitcher and his inevitable comeback as an outfielder, while reading an article or watching a sports report, I first heard of the term "the yips".

"Yips is usually described as focal dystonia, or choking under pressure, or as lying on a continuum between both" (Ioannou, et al.). In an interview Rick described it as, "one of those things like where you just feel like the yips, the monster, this disease. . . . It didn't fight fair, so I felt like, 'Well, you know what? I'm not going to fight fair either,' (Russell). According to The Journal of Neurology, Neurosurgery and Psychiatry, "Isolated dystonia is a group of movement disorders characterized by sustained or intermittent involuntary muscle contractions that lead to abnormal and often repetitive movements, postures or both. These disorders are not accompanied by other neurological abnormalities except for tremor and have no known cause except for relatively rare gene mutations. The most common form of isolated dystonia is adult-onset focal dystonia (AOFD), defined by dystonia that begins in adulthood and primarily affects one body region such as the face, neck or limbs" (Berman 595). In watching how Rick Ankiel lost control of his ability to pitch, I often wondered how common this was and is it truly an illness. Mackey Sasser, former catcher for the New York Mets, also suffered from a severe case of the yips, however, he was able to pin point the exact moment it occurred. In 1990 Sasser was in a serious collision with another player at home plate. Shortly thereafter, Sasser had trouble throwing the baseball back to the pitcher. He would begin to tap his glove and double clutch before he threw the ball back. He spoke in depth about his issues during an ESPN 30 for 30 short film documentary film. Eventually, he overcame his throwing issues after seeking help from a psychotherapist.

During the NBA draft in June of 2017, many NBA pundits were debating who the number one overall pick would be. Was it going to be Lonzo Ball out of UCLA or Markelle Fultz from the University of Washington. During pre-workout drafts, it was evident that Markelle Fultz would be landing the top spot in the NBA draft. Scouts were impressed by his pre-draft workouts and his body of work on the collegiate level helped solidify his position. The time came to draft the NBA class of 2017 and sure enough, Markelle Fultz, the number one pick of the draft, began his journey as an NBA star for the Philadelphia 76ers. By the middle of his rookie season, he struggled, and it became clear that he had lost his jump shot. Reports claimed that he was suffering from a shoulder injury. Another report claimed that he had worked at altering his shot. What became clear was that something was wrong and, in an effort to prolong his career, something had to be done to fix it. Tim Marcin from Newsweek noted, "In months that would follow, there'd be numerous (and conflicting) reports of shoulder injuries and training gone awry. Months later, NBA trainer Drew Hanlen would finally pin his client's issues on the yips--a frightening diagnosis but one most observers had long suspected". It was an unfortunate prognosis and painful process to watch. An elite athlete choking in the moment. Sports psychologist Debbie Crews who studied the yips for two decades told Newsweek, 'It's not about fixing it, it's about outsmarting it, staying one step ahead of it. Staying in charge so the yip is not controlling their game.' (Marcin). In the beginning of 2019, Markelle Fultz was traded to the Orlando Magic where he will be given the opportunity for a fresh start and regain the form that had him as the top collegiate athlete in the country.

## Results

Initially, the yips were a common occurrence with golfers. Identified as the putting yips, the act of putting for a golfer can be one of the most important strokes they can take during a match or

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game. Imagine standing on the green with a silent crowd behind you watching and waiting on you to put the golf ball in the cup. It is nerve racking just to think about it. Studies have been aimed to confirm that reinvestment, defined as the attempt to consciously control one's own movement during skill execution by the application of explicit and rule-based knowledge, also leads to the occurrence of the yips, which would have important implications for designing effective interventions. As a result of the study, it was determined that there was no link between reinvestment and the yips as described (Martin, et al.). So, what is the root cause of the yips? How are athlete's able to overcome such a debilitating, career ending condition? Many believe that it is a performance anxiety issue, yet research suggests that athletes with movement disorders actual have a form of focal limb dystonia (Journal of Family Practice). Athletes with the yips were treated with low dose medication to relieve anxiety and relax the muscles. The Journal of Family Practice published the results and determined that repetitive use was a contributing factor and that it was also a treatable neurological condition and required more research. Baseball players such as Chuck Knoblauch and Steve Sax, who were notable for struggling to make throws from second base to first base (one of the easiest throws in baseball) realized that when they threw the ball without thinking about it, they had no problems. It was the moment that slow ground ball reached them that they had time to think about the throw and by the time it left their hands, it ended up in the stands. This example would validate the neurological condition as the contributing factor.

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