



# Being Clutch, Or How Not To Choke Under Pressure

Paul Sullivan

# *What does it mean to be clutch?*

Sports fans are confident they know it when they see it. But consider the following three classic moments in sports. They have all been called clutch moments, but only one of them actually is:

- ➔ In game seven of the 1965 Eastern Conference basketball championship the score stood at 110–109. The Boston Celtics led the Philadelphia 76ers by one point with five seconds left on the clock. The 76ers had been given possession of the ball and were ready to inbound it. Whichever player got it had time for one shot, to win or lose the game. As Hal Greer, the 76ers' All-Star guard, threw the ball into play, Johnny Havlicek spun and tipped it to his Celtics teammate. "Havlicek steals it!" boomed Johnny Most, the gravelly-voiced announcer of the Celtics. "Havlicek stole the ball! It's all over. It's all over . . . Johnny Havlicek stole the ball!" Arguably the most famous call in basketball, it has immortalized the play. What it leaves out is that Havlicek had his back to Greer and spun at just the right moment to tip the ball. This makes what he did even more extraordinary. He wasn't even looking at Greer. But his quick move gave the Celtics the victory.
- ➔ Two decades later, Tommy Lasorda, the Los Angeles Dodgers manager, decided to put Kirk Gibson in as a pinch hitter. Down 4–3 in the first game of the 1988 World Series, with two outs and the tying run at first base, Gibson would have been the ideal choice in the circumstance—had he not had a stomach bug and two legs in such pain that he limped to the plate. If he hit

a pitch anywhere in the ballpark, he wouldn't have made it to first. He could only do one thing: hit a home run. Gibson, in that shape, looked like an easy out, even more so because he was facing Dennis Eckersley, the Oakland Athletics star pitcher and future Hall of Famer. But Gibson worked the count until it stood at three balls and two strikes. On the next pitch, he swung, all arms and no legs, and hit the ball out of the park to win the game. His hobbling around the bases, fist raised in triumph, remains a quintessential image of fortitude, determination, and toughness.

- ➔ Fast-forward another twenty years, and Eli Manning, the New York Giants quarterback, was facing a situation he had faced many times in his career: getting close to victory in an important game only to lose in the end. Tom Brady, considered one of the best quarterbacks of his era, had just brought the New England Patriots back from three points down to four points ahead in the last eight minutes of Super Bowl XLII. He had passed, handed off, scrambled—everything he could think of to get the Patriots into scoring position. When he threw to Randy Moss in the end zone, it seemed that Brady, with his nerves of steel, had engineered another come-from-behind victory. The score stood at 14–10 with two minutes left on the clock. Manning had led his wildcard team to the Super Bowl, but now it looked as though it was over. He had nothing to be ashamed of; it had been a great run. But it didn't play out that way. With the highest stakes of his career—win and beat a team that was expecting to go undefeated, lose and forever be overshadowed by his brother Peyton who had won the Super Bowl the year before—Manning refused to quit. He led his team down the field until he threw a short pass to Plaxico Burress in the end zone. The final score was 17–14, with the Giants as Super Bowl champions.

**Which of these amazing sports moments was clutch?** There is only one right answer. Here's a fourth option that might help you decide: In July 2009, Roger Federer faced off against Andy Roddick in the Wimbledon final. Federer had had his five-year winning streak broken the year before. But this match was more than a comeback. If Federer won, it would be his fifteenth Grand Slam tennis title, more than any other player had ever won. Roddick, who had lost in the final three previous times, was in the best shape of his career, and he got out to an early lead, winning the first set. Federer won the next two. In the fourth, Roddick came from behind to force a fifth set to decide the match. At 8-8, Federer looked as though he might lose, but he came back, and the set stretched to 15-14 before Roddick faltered. Federer won 16-14. At the end of the four-hour match, the two had played 77 games—a Wimbledon record—and the longest fifth set in the championship's history. With his victory, Federer had broken Pete Sampras's Grand Slam record—with Sampras watching courtside.

So, now, which of the four were clutch? If you picked the last two, you were right.

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## Clutch is More Than Sports

Most people associate clutch performances with a triumphant sports moment: the home run that wins the game or the basket or stolen pass at the buzzer. But each of these contains an element of luck, and clutch is not luck. Gibson could have easily struck out or merely hit a triple (well, not on his bad legs, but...), and Havlicek's play was incredibly risky. However great these plays were, they relied on a good deal of luck. They were remarkable, but they were not clutch. Being clutch is not the hole-in-one to win; it's the well-struck shot close to the flag and the putt that drops in with the tournament on the line. It's the precisely executed series of plays in football, not the Hail Mary pass. It's the fortitude to continue battling out a Wimbledon final as you always have—even though the whole world is wondering whether you are going to choke. Clutch, simply put, is the ability to do what you can do normally under immense pressure. It is also something that goes far beyond the world of sport. And while it has a mental component, it is not a mystical ability, nor some willing yourself to greatness. After all, every professional athlete is mentally tough; They wouldn't have made it that far if they weren't. For that matter, every chief executive of a company has shown leadership to get where they are. But that does not mean they will be clutch.

Being great under pressure is hard work. This is part of the reason why we are so impressed by people who seem immune to choking. These people come through in the clutch when others don't. If they're business leaders, they become gurus other executives want to emulate. In politics, the person who runs the gauntlet wins the election, but if he can do so in a particularly cunning way, he becomes an example of strategic excellence. In combat, it is the leaders who come under fire and get their men to safety who are recognized as war heroes. If the people are sporting figures, their triumphs become legendary. We are so fascinated by these feats that we have created a nearly mythical aura around clutch performers. Think of what happens every time the Olympics roll around. People suddenly start rooting for athletes they have never heard of, in sports they don't usually care about. We crave the feel-good story of the kid from nowhere who uses his one shot to win

gold. But often we start to think of him as more than a great athlete, and this is when problems start. Such deification muddies how the greatest athletes, businessmen, politicians, and military commanders learn to perform so well under pressure.

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Just because someone is clutch in one area of his life does not mean he will be clutch in others. Tiger Woods could be the pitchman for this. He was so great under the pressure of a golf tournament that his fans ascribed to him superhuman qualities. But when the world learned about his Las Vegas assignations, they felt betrayed: How could he make such good decisions in his professional life but such bad ones in his personal life? Yet, if anything, I believe his double life made his ability on the golf course more, not less, remarkable. At the peak of his reputation for being a clutch performer, a few months after he won the 2008 U.S. Open on a broken leg, I sat down with Tiger at a golf course in Arden, North Carolina, ten miles outside of Asheville. When I asked him during our interview how he always seemed to win a tournament when the pressure was greatest, the simplicity of his answer struck me. "I've put myself there, in that situation, more times than anybody else," he told me. "I've also failed more times than anybody else. But along the way, you do succeed." I found

that his explanation only goes part of the way to understanding why some people excel under pressure and others do not.

What it means to be clutch for the rest of us is far simpler and far more difficult to achieve than just putting yourself out there. Think of it a different way: Tiger hits perfect shots on the driving range. He hits them pretty much any way he wants, left, right, low, high. But in this he is not so different from anyone else on the PGA Tour. They can all hit those shots on the practice range. When the tournament starts, Tiger does something different, particularly if he is in contention to win: He swings as though he is still on the range. He swings just as fluidly in moments of intense pressure when other pros can tense up like average golfers. He hits the ball on the eighteenth hole to win the way he would if he were playing with friends. This is why being clutch is difficult. Transferring what you can do in a relaxed atmosphere to a tenser one is not easy—or else everyone would be clutch.

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## How To Be Clutch

So, why are some people so good under pressure when most of us are not? Why can clutch performers act in a pressure-filled situation the way they would act normally? The reality is that most people fail in extreme situations. They may be able to do what they do just fine under everyday conditions, but when the pressure mounts, their ability leaves them. They choke. Yet there is a small subset of people who not only succeed but thrive under pressure. There are people we hold up for their excellence. They're heroes. What I discovered, though, was they all share certain traits. I found five key ones.

**The first is focus.** It is the foundation for any clutch performance. While it may sound simple, it is not. It is also not the same thing as concentration, which is to focus what arithmetic is to higher-level mathematics. David Boies, one of the great litigators of our time, has perfected the ability to focus in one high-profile trial after another—*Westmorland v. CBS*, *The Republic of the Philippines v. Westinghouse*, *U.S. v. Microsoft*, *Bush v. Gore*, *A.I.G. v. SICO*. His technique is to conceive of every trial as a morality play and to use that to frame his argument. In this way, he is always focused on telling that story—not concentrating on what the other side is doing or letting arcane facts confuse the jury. In the Microsoft antitrust case, Boies did not concentrate on the browser technology at the heart of the allegations. He said it was so complex that one of Microsoft's engineers could have blown his argument out of the water by saying that the operating system simply worked better with the browser embedded. Instead, Boies focused on credibility. Were the statements that Bill Gates made in the past true? If he contradicted himself on them now, could he be believed when he was talking about something as economically important to Microsoft as Internet Explorer? Gates flip-flopped on the witness stand and it damaged his credibility. Boies' focus on just that—the credibility and believability of Gates and other Microsoft officials—but the key was his ability to focus sustained him under the pressure of representing the United States in the biggest antitrust trial of the 1990s.



**The second trait is discipline.** In the late 1970s, Ari Kiev, a Harvard- and Cornell-trained psychiatrist, was working for the U.S. Sports Medicine Committee. His task was to help top athletes get better under pressure. Few were interested in what he had to offer given how sports psychology was then perceived. The exception was the riflery team: they wanted to know why they could not shoot as well in competition as they did in practice. This set Kiev's mind racing. Shooting a gun should, after all, be no different in the two settings: there was no home field advantage, no opponent charging at you, no rowdy fans shouting as you shot. But the best in the world missed their targets. Kiev found that if the riflemen had the discipline to shoot between breaths they were able to manage the stress of competition better.

This led to a much broader—and lucrative—opportunity for him. Kiev met Steven Cohen a few years later. Cohen was then a young trader but showed the promise that has made him one of the most successful hedge fund managers of all time. Kiev took his belief in discipline to Cohen's trading floor. Just as he had done with Olympians, Kiev taught traders the discipline needed to set limits—both positive and negative—that would tell them when to sell a stock. In doing so, Kiev helped remove the emotion that clouds people's judgments under pressure.

**The third is adaptability.** To me this is best summed up in the motto of Colonel Tom Kolditz, the head of the behavioral sciences department at West Point: "Fight the fight, don't fight the plan." What this means quite simply is if your plan is failing under pressure, don't stick to it: adapt and come up with a new plan. The reasons in the military are quite clear: life and death hang in the balance. But companies and executives can learn from it too.

Christopher Falkenberg experienced first hand the need to adapt under pressure. In 1992, he was a young Secret Service agent. Assigned to protect Bill Clinton when Clinton was a long-shot presidential candidate, Falkenberg was still with him as he rose in the polls and began attracting enormous crowds. At a stop in California, a man emerged from the crowd and grabbed Clinton. When Clinton

said he could not free his hand, Falkenberg swiftly broke the man's arm. More importantly, he whisked Clinton to a waiting SUV and away from the event.

Secret Service agents are trained to do as much as possible to ensure that nothing like this happens. But that is not always the reality, so when their plan fails they have to adapt quickly.

The key, though, is they adapt while keeping a single, important goal in mind. In this case, it was protecting Clinton. This is an extreme example of adapting, but think of how often people fall in love with their plans: even when they are clearly not working, they will not change them.

**The fourth trait is the ability to be present.** People cannot succeed under pressure if they are thinking of anything other than what they are doing right now. This is the root cause of "stage fright." People fail while giving public speeches not because of the crowd but because of what they fear the crowd thinks about them, because of all the other things that are racing through their head in that moment of intense pressure. Getting to a point of being present, of making only the present moment matter is not easy.

It took Larry Clarke, a well-known character actor, years to master this. And he learned how to do this the hard way, while filming his first episode on Law & Order in the late 1990s. When the director shouted action, Clarke began to mumble. The director was furious because TV shows are filmed under tight time constraints, and he had to shoot take after take. Clarke knew his lines, but when he got to the set he felt awed by his famous cast members. He finally pulled off the part and was invited back. But it was only in subsequent episodes that he stopped thinking of the other actors as anything other than his colleagues. That was when he was able to be present and do what he had always been able to do well: act.

**The fifth trait is the push and pull of fear and desire.** Unlike the first four traits, this one is more macro. It is an overarching life strategy. The reason is that, under pressure, a desire for success can be more effective when tempered by a bit of fear. Bernie Marcus, the founder of The Home Depot, is a case in point. As Marcus and his partners were about to open their first store in Atlanta, he realized they did not have enough merchandise to fill the shelves in the cavernous warehouse store. So he began to order empty boxes and empty paint cans to stock the shelves customers could not reach.

Marcus had been fired from his last job, and at 49 he knew there was a lot riding on the success of this idea. “An empty box costs us 50 cents,” he said. “With merchandise in it, it was a lot more.” Two years after opening that store, the company was on its way to making Marcus a billionaire.

Yet pairing fear and desire was part of the company’s strategy, which they dubbed the “running scared” management philosophy. It reminded them to never lose sight of the fact that a few mistakes can derail any retail company. They had a deep desire to succeed and worked hard to drive their company in that direction, but they were always fearful of what they did not know and how that could bring them down. After all, the company that fired Marcus, a hardware chain called Handy Dan, went out of business a decade after he left.

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## How To Avoid Choking

The five clutch traits are all things we can learn but it will take work. They're positive things we should try to incorporate under pressure. But what about why we fall short? After all, most people choke when the pressure is great. Yet, just as people who are clutch share common traits, people who choke usually do so for three reasons.


**At the top of the list is a failure to accept responsibility.** Before someone chokes under pressure, chances are he has failed to hold himself accountable in other less stressful situations. This was the case in the financial crisis. Ken Lewis, then the head of Bank of America, let the largest bank in the U.S. reach the edge of insolvency as he repeatedly failed to take responsibility for the decisions he made in the acquisition of Merrill Lynch. For one, Lewis said he did not know when a series of controversial bonuses were paid to departing Merrill executives. (A year after the deal it was revealed that he did.) Then, when BofA posted a nearly \$2 billion loss at the end of the fourth quarter of 2009, Lewis tried to present this as something he could not have foreseen—even though the toxic securities were sitting on Merrill's books when the merger happened.

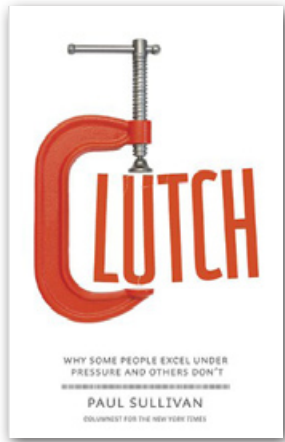
The worst dodge came over Lewis trying to get the Federal Reserve to exonerate him for doing the deal and asking if they could send him a letter saying they had forced him to buy Merrill. They wouldn't do this; he had been responsible for his decision. Yet when asked months later about this request by Congressmen Dennis Kucinich, Lewis denied he had ever asked for such a thing—until Kucinich produced a document from a Federal Reserve attorney saying he had. It never had to come to this. In the year after the Merrill deal, Lewis could have helped the bank he had worked for all of his life if he had admitted what he knew when he knew it. This would have required taking responsibility, of saying he had been wrong. He couldn't do this and before 2009 was over he was no longer B of A's chief executive.

**Overthinking the magnitude of a situation** is another surefire way to choke. Imagining your greatness before you achieve it, focusing on the outcome before you create it—these are symptoms of overthinking. You can see it in many professional athletes, particularly when they are on the cusp of a milestone or in a do-or-die situation. Think of all of those baseball pitchers about to get their 200th win or sluggers on the cusp of 400 or 500 home runs. There is almost always a longer gap between previous wins or homeruns and the one that pushes them over the mark. They start seeing themselves alongside a list of the greats, of overthinking what they did to get them to that point. This was Alex Rodriguez's problem in the summer of 2010 when he sat at 599 homeruns for weeks. Yet for fans and detractors of the highest paid player in baseball, it was also a stark reminder of his history of overthinking in clutch situations. For years, A-Rod failed to live up to his ability when it mattered most, and so much of this was due to how he conceived of himself. Since he was an 18-year-old prospect, he had been told he was one of the best of all time and that was how his agent started marketing him in 2001—as a player without living peers, as someone who should be compared with Hall of Fame hitters, not anyone currently playing in the league. The problem here was A-Rod believed his own hype. And it took personal and professional crashes—divorce and an admission of steroid use—to get him to stop overthinking.

**The third trait of chokers is overconfidence.** Believing that success is easy and either owed to you or all but guaranteed will make you choke every time. General Motors was a case study in this, for decades. In fact, it was just this type of corporate overconfidence that GM exhibited when it agreed to a joint venture with Toyota in 1982. At the time, GM was the world's largest car-maker, and for its part in the JV, it gave the Japanese automaker access to its worst-performing plant, in Fremont, California. In return, Toyota revealed its famed production system and showed GM how to build a compact car. It seemed like a lopsided deal, tilted decidedly in GM's favor. But Toyota turned the tables and used the JV to learn the American car market and set it on the route to overtaking GM as the world's largest carmaker. GM, for its part, never learned how to make and market

a compact car in America. And in the summer of 2009, we all saw the effects of decades of corporate overconfidence as GM descended into bankruptcy.

It is clearly much easier to choke than it is to be clutch. (Yet I would argue avoiding the mistakes of chokers is easier still than embracing those of clutch performers.) What is important to remember, though, is being clutch is not a mystical state. It takes work but it can be learned. In embracing the five traits that define people who are great under pressure, you can become better in tough situations. **You can become clutch.** 



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul Sullivan is the author of *Clutch: Why Some People Excel Under Pressure and Others Don't* (Portfolio, 2010). He writes the Wealth Matters column for *The New York Times*. His articles have appeared in *Conde Nast Portfolio*, *The International Herald Tribune*, *Barron's*, *The Boston Globe*, and *Food & Wine*. From 2000 to 2006, he was a reporter, editor and columnist at the *Financial Times*. His first big story for FT was a profile of the author Kurt Vonnegut, who he approached on a train leaving Springfield, Massachusetts, and the two spoke on their way to New York City. (His last piece for the FT was Vonnegut's obituary.) Paul received degrees in history from Trinity College and the University of Chicago. He lives in Stamford, Connecticut, with his family.

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