

THE
NEW YORKERIN SPORTS, A MUST-WIN SITUATION
USUALLY LEADS TO A LOSS

By Alan Burdick June 12, 2018



After a hard loss in 2016, Argentine soccer champion Lionel Messi quit the national team. He will be under enormous pressure to perform in the World Cup, which opens on Thursday.

Photograph by Hector Vivas / LatinContent / Getty

On May 31st, Mauricio Macri, the President of Argentina, met with the members of the nation's soccer team as they departed for training before the World Cup, which opens, in Russia, on Thursday. "Whatever we Argentinians achieve, we will be happy," Macri told the squad, in televised remarks. "And it is not true that if one does not become a champion, one is a failure; that is a madness that does not exist anywhere in the world." This, coming from the leader of a soccer-mad nation—the home of Lionel Messi, no less—was a shocking concession: *Our team might not win the World Cup. And if they don't, we'll love them anyway.*

Macri's statement was calibrated to lower the pressure of expectation on the squad, particularly on Messi, who is widely regarded as the best soccer player in Argentine history (Diego Maradona might disagree) and maybe the best anywhere, ever. Argentina has won the World Cup twice—the last time in 1986, with Maradona—but not in its last three appearances, with Messi. After the 2014 tournament, which saw Argentina lose the final to Germany in overtime, the bitterness was audible, and, in 2016, after losing the Copa América Centenario (and missing a penalty kick), Messi quit the national team. He was coaxed back, but the squad struggled to qualify for the 2018 tournament and is defensively weak; Messi, who turns thirty-one soon, could be playing his last World Cup. Macri, in his remarks, seemed to be looking to balance hope against reality—and perhaps, by lowering the psychological burden, to increase the odds of success.

That was a good idea, if a new study in *Frontiers in Psychology*, “Choking or Delivering Under Pressure? The Case of Elimination Games in NBA Playoffs,” is any guide. Common wisdom holds that, in a must-win situation, a team will dig deep and come up with something extra. That may be true, but the exertion doesn't necessarily translate into winning. Yair Galily, a sports psychologist at the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya, in Israel, and his postdoc Elia Morgulev, analyzed three decades of playoff performances among N.B.A. teams and found that teams did worse in must-win situations than when the stakes were low or were equal for both teams.

“We thought it would help when you have your back against the wall,” Galily told me. “You need to win or your season is ended; it's a great incentive to play at your best. But we learned that the opposite is true.”

In economics and psychology, “expected utility theory” predicts that people work hardest, and perform their best, when the net returns to effort are highest. Pain equals gain. It's a common theme in military narratives: the behavioral psychologist Daniel Ariely, in his book “Predictably Irrational,” offers the example of the Chinese warlord Xiang Yu, who, crossing the Yellow River in 208 B.C., spurred his rebel forces onward by burning their ships behind them. And plenty of research shows that avoiding loss can be an incentive. A 2011 study, in which the researchers analyzed the results of two and a half million golf putts, found that golfers tried harder when putting for par—that is, to avoid a bogey, one shot over par—than when putting for a birdie, par-minus-one.

But plenty of research also shows that applying too much pressure can backfire, causing the phenomenon known as “choking.” A study, from 2008, which looked at the outcome of every penalty taken in the Bundesliga, Germany’s top soccer league, from 1963 to 2004, found that the penalty-taker was more likely to choke and miss the goal altogether if the game was at home, likely due to the added pressure of playing before a crowd of expectant fans. A 2011 analysis of several N.B.A. seasons found that a player on the free-throw line shoots five to ten per cent worse, on average, when his team is down by one or two points during the last thirty and sixty seconds of the game. (Interestingly, choking evaporates in the final fifteen seconds of tied games—perhaps, the authors note, because players “perceive that even if the shot is missed, the shooter cannot be held directly responsible for the game outcome.”)

Previous studies on sports performance under pressure have tended to look at individual athletes—golfers, soccer and hockey players, baseball batters, biathletes. Galily and Morgulev wanted to understand how a team as a whole responds to added pressure. To build a database, they chose the N.B.A.’s best-of-seven playoff series, because it presents numerous occasions in which one team, but not the other, must win or be eliminated: when down three games to two, three to one, or three to none. They looked at thirty-three seasons, from 1984 to 2016—more than nineteen hundred best-of-seven playoff games, four hundred and thirty-seven of which were critical for either the home or the away team. Must-win was more likely to translate into a loss, the researchers found. If a team had, say, a sixty-five per cent chance of winning at home in the playoffs, its odds fell to fifty-five per cent if the game was a must-win for them but not for the visitors. Likewise, if the game was must-win for the visitors but not the home team, the visitors’ chance of winning fell to just twenty-six per cent. Galily said that they were closely watching the fourth and, ultimately, final game of the the Cleveland-Golden State series “to see if our results held up.” They did.

While some pressure can be a good thing, Galily said, “The question is, how much is too much?” His study didn’t address that, but his results offer a cautionary lesson not only for coaches but for office managers and military commanders: don’t try to improve everyone’s performance by adding to the pressure that they already knows exists.

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“You prepare for the mission just as you would for a regular mission,” Galily said. He mentioned Macri’s comments to the Argentinian team: “Oh yeah, ‘We’re gonna love you anyway. Just play your best.’ I think that’s the better route. Of course, it depends on how he said it.” Here, Macri may have sent the team, and Messi in particular, a bit of a mixed message. Back in January, he was quoted as saying, “The most important thing is to compete well and then God and Messi will decide if we can win the World Cup.” God will decide, or Messi. No pressure, Leo. No pressure at all.

Alan Burdick, a staff writer, joined The New Yorker in 2012. He is the author, most recently, of “Why Time Flies: A Mostly Scientific Investigation.” [Read more »](#)

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