



# Book Clutch

## Why Some People Excel Under Pressure and Others Don't

Paul Sullivan  
Portfolio, 2010

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### Recommendation

Everyone faces “clutch” situations, those times when you need to function under intense pressure. Few excel in these stressful moments; most choke. *New York Times* columnist Paul Sullivan investigates what makes the notable few who can handle stress so reliable under pressure. He interviews top athletes – including Tiger Woods – highly decorated combat veterans, seasoned heads of financial institutions, and successful traders to discover their secrets and methods. Without making his prose sound like something from a self-help book, Sullivan outlines how to avoid choking and how to stand tall in the clutch. He includes everything from stage fright to keeping a cool head in combat and makes extensive use of real-life examples to bring home his points. The book is entertaining but frustratingly short of actual prescription, leading you to suspect that being clutch may be a more innate than learned talent. Nonetheless, *BooksInShort* recommends this intriguing overview to anyone who has ever choked under pressure and wants to see what it means to be clutch.

### Take-Aways

- To be “clutch” is to shine in stressful circumstances that require you to make crucial decisions quickly.
- Very few people do well in the clutch. Most people “choke” or fail to rise to the occasion.
- Excelling under pressure in one arena doesn’t mean you’ll do equally well in all areas.
- The essence of being clutch is to behave under stress the same way you do at relaxed times.
- Unwavering focus and clear-headed discipline underlie every clutch performance.
- Clutch players are flexible when change happens; they stay “present” and ready.
- Actors, soldiers, traders and athletes all live in the moment when they perform.
- Shirking responsibility, overthinking a problem and being overconfident in your plans ensure that you will choke.
- Performing in the financial clutch means accepting your economic realities and being accountable for your decisions.
- “To be clutch in sports,” improve your game, stay fit, train like you play, and maintain a routine.

### Summary

#### Many Are Called, Few Are Chosen

The word “clutch” generally refers to the device that enables an automobile’s transmission to shift gears. But in the American vernacular, clutch has a completely different meaning. To “be clutch,” or to “perform well in the clutch,” is to do your best under the most stressful, pressurized circumstances that give you little time to make decisions that carry serious consequences. Very few people do well in the clutch. Most people “choke” or fail to rise to the occasion. “Transferring what you can do in a relaxed atmosphere to a tenser one is not easy – or else everyone would be clutch.” And of the small percentage of the population capable of being clutch, most of those only are clutch in specific circumstances.

“The reality is that most people fail in extreme situations...when the pressure mounts, their ability leaves them. They choke.”

Tiger Woods might be the most clutch professional golfer of all time; he is able to make incredibly difficult shots at crucial moments in elite tournaments with the same apparent ease he demonstrates on the practice tee. But Woods’s highly publicized, scandalous private life, and the choices he made there, suggest that his astute, high-

wire decision-making skills in golf do not transfer to other areas in his life.

“Just because someone is successful does not mean he will be good under pressure. High-profile chokers are the car crash we can’t take our eyes off of.”

Clutch extends beyond the arena of sports. Some leaders of large financial institutions, faced with crucial choices under great time pressure during the recent economic meltdown, made sound functional decisions but showed a grave absence of moral judgment. Politicians may withstand the rigors of running for election, but few embody the “strategic excellence” clutch confers. To understand what makes someone a clutch player, consider these aspects:

## “Focus”

“Many people confuse focus with concentration.” Most individuals can concentrate, moment to moment, on the issues right in front of them, but few can maintain the all-encompassing focus required to consider the ramifications of every action, every statement and every maneuver, and how each contributes to the larger picture. Think of trial lawyers, who have to maintain a single-minded attention to every aspect of their cases. Athletes can concentrate on their form in any given moment, but can they focus as intently on all their actions throughout the course of a competition? Focus enables you to see the entire problem and to understand each component. Unwavering focus underlies every clutch performance.

## “Discipline”

“Discipline is almost always a battle against yourself.” You need discipline in the clutch because it’s hard to make calm, clear-headed choices based purely on the criteria of the moment. Most people find it difficult to keep the past out of the present. Undisciplined individuals unconsciously load their decision making with emotional and intellectual baggage from the past and, thus, make wrong choices.

“Focus is the foundation for any clutch performance.”

Financial market professionals, who make clutch decisions every day, must be disciplined in their trading or face ruin. If a trader sets a goal of a certain percentage of profit for every trade, then that trader must have the discipline to sell once he or she reaches that percentage, no matter the potential upside of hanging on. Undisciplined traders might – if they achieved their predetermined margin quickly – stay with the market to see if their lot improves. People become less rational under stress. Those with discipline know better than to trust instinct when they’re under pressure. Discipline builds resilience. All traders have losing days, but clutch traders show up the next day, ready to do battle once more. Discipline means taking a hard, objective look at your own strategies, having the courage to discard those that don’t work and embracing a new reality.

## “Adapting”

US Army Sergeant Willie Copeland heroically demonstrated the importance of adapting in the clutch during an ambush on his convoy in Iraq. Throughout the ensuing battle, Copeland kept his nerve, remaining focused and observant. He didn’t stick to a predetermined strategy but changed his tactics and behavior as battlefield conditions shifted. Copeland’s cool performance in the clutch saved numerous lives and earned him recognition and a medal; it also showed how to “fight the fight” rather than “fight the plan.”

People love to plan, and in the clutch, most “fall back on what they expected to do ahead of time.” Their prior strategizing gives them a sense of safety, even if the situation that plays out renders their plan dysfunctional. Copeland focused on outcomes – staying alive and protecting his comrades – and stayed flexible, reacting to the battle as it unfolded. Copeland was wholly present; thoughts of what had worked in the past never clouded his judgment. Copeland also never considered his own emotions. He focused outward – on the event – and by doing so was able to gain control over the fear, excitement and confusion that could have paralyzed him.

## “Being Present”

To perform in the clutch, remain in a “state of readiness”; embrace the present to the exclusion of everything else – as if you were in battle – when circumstances demand. Actors know all about the need to be present. They have to assume an emotion in a role in an instant and to live that emotion in their performance. If actors try to hold onto that sensation all day long, the likelihood is they will be unable to muster it when they need it. If actors think outside the present – about their audience, the job they might lose or the humiliation they will suffer if they fail – then they will falter. Actors, soldiers, traders and athletes all live in the moment when they perform. To do that, they must focus, exercise discipline and adapt.

## People choke in the clutch for three underlying reasons:

### 1. Refusal to Take Responsibility

If you don’t take responsibility for your actions, you will choke. The fear of owning your potential failure almost guarantees that you will not be focused, disciplined, adaptive or present. Clutch individuals remain accountable for every decision they make and its consequences. One reason most people have trouble taking responsibility is that any reward for standing up comes well after the event. No one will applaud you at the crucial moment. “Responsibility here is not an accounting of your actions, it is your actions.” If you are prepared for the inescapable reality, you will be stronger, more relaxed and more likely to succeed in the clutch.

### 2. “Overthinking”

A comparison between two baseball players highlights how preparation, clarity and purpose can make the difference between success and failure. Pitcher David Price of the Tampa Bay Rays simply does what he was trained to do: Throw the baseball. He performs well in regular season games, and he shines in the clutch of the playoffs. Why? Because he never changes what he does, and he never alters his mental attitude. He does not think about the stakes as the games grow more important. He doesn’t let nervousness flood his system with adrenaline nor fear tighten up his body and restrict his motions. He trained in college under a coach famous for

conducting rigorous practices at the speed and pace of real games. Because the coach made his players perform the way the real world requires, they grew accustomed to playing under pressure; they learned to trust their technique.

“What holds people back is the powerful emotional force that the decision-making part of the brain exerts over the rational part.”

In contrast, Alex Rodriguez, known as A-Rod, has been a baseball superstar since high school. His statistics and regular season performances are the stuff of legend, and he’s widely regarded as the best player in the game. Yet every year during the playoffs, he would choke: His number of hits plummeted, his defensive play suffered, and he struck out. The worse he played, the more he thought, and the more he thought, the more he tried to alter his playing style, his batting stance, his diet, anything to get a positive result. He was undermining himself by going against his lifelong training and technique. Then, at a low point in his career, A-Rod remembered that relaxing and living with the results of his actions, no matter what, are the essence of sport. As soon as he managed to let go of his anxiety, he stopped overthinking and his performance improved.

### 3. “Overconfidence”

“Overconfidence is the bigger, more destructive cousin of overthinking.” If you believe too much in your own judgment or methodology, and you discover in the clutch that either or both are flawed, you likely will suffer a paralytic meltdown. Overconfidence means not even considering adapting, because you’re sure your way is best. Prepare for the clutch by constantly questioning your approach to strategy and problem solving. Have a trusted outsider play devil’s advocate and try to find holes in all your methods. Owning the possibility of being wrong is not the same as lacking confidence: You can be confident while being realistic. If you never subject your processes to rigorous analysis, you never will fight the fight; you will forever fight the plan, no matter how obsolete events have rendered it.

### Performing in the Financial Clutch

Take five steps to being clutch when you’re under financial stress:

1. **“Accept”** – Step up to the reality of your situation. Don’t live in denial or hope your problem will go away or get better on its own. Being responsible and recognizing your predicament will help you reach potential solutions.
2. **“Psychologically readjust”** – Understand your feelings about your finances. Giving in to anger toward yourself or others will prevent you from seeing your situation clearly. So will surrendering to self-pity. Emotions like stress impede rational processes. Examine your assets and liabilities coldly and clinically. Once you stand on a sound rational basis, you are ready for action.
3. **“Prioritize”** – When you understand the hard choices you must make, make them. “Getting rid of what you can’t afford in a crisis will go a long way to bettering your financial position.” People often resist changing their lifestyles and try to live as they always did. If you are under pressure, own the changes that must happen.
4. **“Take responsibility”** – Clinging to the past or wallowing in emotion will not help you. Own your mistakes, sell what you can, and let your past actions – right or wrong – remain in the past. Be present and sort out your best course.
5. **“Focus on outcomes”** – You will prevail only if you remain committed to your goal: financial solvency. To be clutch means to look toward the future. Clutch performers seldom make the same mistake twice; they recognize and learn from their errors.

“Under pressure, sound fundamentals matter more.”

“To be clutch in sports,” pay attention to these four areas:

1. **“Technique”** – All sports performances rest on technique. Learn your core weaknesses and work on them. Most people only like to work on the part of their game that already is good; it’s much more satisfying than working on the parts that are shaky. But the only way to be clutch in any sport is to have a sound, all-around game. Take lessons, read books, watch videos and work on the worst aspects of your game.
2. **“Physical conditioning”** – No matter what your sport, you must be fit, strong and flexible to play. Work out, stretch, watch your diet and cross-train, that is, do something other than the sport you play most often. The better your conditioning, the better you will be in the clutch.
3. **“Simulate pressure”** – Train as if you were in a match. Practice at speed, and focus on the quality, not the quantity, of your training. Put yourself under pressure as you practice with imaginary stakes before each shot or swing.
4. **“An unwavering routine”** – Set up for your matches the same way every time: Warm up and do your workouts consistently. The more routine you can inject into your sports life, the more relaxed you will be before a big match. A preparation routine that you follow every day in practice will let you be clutch on the day of the big game.

### About the Author

**Paul Sullivan** writes the Wealth Matters column for *The New York Times*.

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