

Breaking Down The Block! (Coaches)

Getting it, losing it, and getting it back again in figure skating

By Alison Arnold Ph.D.

It's so frustrating. One minute they can do the element the next minute they can't. So many skaters can do a jump or combination perfectly one day, only to find themselves losing it, or worse yet, not even being able to go for it at all. Take the story of Camille for example,

"One day I was doing my double axel perfectly. It had taken me three months to learn it and finally I got it! I was so happy. The next day I came to the rink and would not even try one! I just kept popping, skating around, and popping again. It wasn't like I was scared, it was like I had a block inside my body that said "don't go". My coaches were frustrated, and I was frustrated. I wasn't sure what was going on."

This happens to every skater at one time or another. A block so strong it shakes their confidence down to the very core. Dealing with an athlete who won't do an element they are perfectly capable of doing is one of the most frustrating situations for coaches. You know they can do it perfectly, you know there is nothing to be afraid of, and still they won't go. This article will give you some tools to help you break down the block before the block breaks you down.

Where do Blocks come from?

All fears and blocks come from out of control thinking. The mind controls the body. If your athletes are not feeling confident or are thinking negative thoughts, their bodies respond with fear, frustration, and popping. It's strange, but sometimes they are totally unaware this is happening. Many figure skaters say they are not afraid, but continue to make countless circles and pop on elements. It's important for coaches to know, if there is popping, there is usually some kind of fear or negative thinking. It may be a fear about something that has never happened. Or something that might happen. It might be a response to too much pressure. Or not doing enough progressions leading up to the element. Even if the athlete says over and over again, they are not afraid, it is always some type of lack of confidence leading to the block. Whatever it is, the key is to change their thinking!

We know how powerful the mind is. Think of the mind like a sailboat on the ocean of life. As the boat sails, thoughts control the weather. Negative thought patterns create storms and blocks in our lives, while positive thought patterns create smooth sailing. The disciplined athlete has as much control of their thoughts as a musician has control of his instrument. It is essential to increase awareness of when their thoughts become out of control. A "tight mind" is one that is focused, effortless, confident, rational, and in control. A "loose mind" is negative, dramatic, irrational, over-thinking, doubtful and out of control. Most blocks come from having a loose mind. Too many times, the mind becomes loose, going off on its own "field trip" of negativity and doubt. These field trips may lead to losing an element. Remember, out of control thinking leads to out of control performance.

As a coach, it is essential you correct loose mind just as you would correct improper body alignment. Similarly to observing improper alignment, it is extremely easy to see when your athlete has a loose mind. Strange rituals, popping, and negative body language are all signs of loose mind. It's easy to bring their attention back to their thinking by saying, "Your mind looks loose, repeat the correction inside your head over and over", or "Better physically, now tighten it up mentally".

Battling the Block: 3 Keys to Breakthrough

A figure skater battling the block needs to bring out the entire army. There are three aspects of training that are especially helpful. Only utilizing one or two of these aspects is like fighting a battle with one hand tied behind your back. Two of these training interventions are physical one is mental. It's very common for coaches and athletes to do the physical interventions without addressing the mental. Since we know that blocks are mostly mental, it's crucial coaches and athletes address the mental side too. The two physical aspects are progressions and repetitions, the mental aspect is tightening the mind. When coaches address a block simply with repetitions and progressions, they may see results over time. With enough progressions and repetitions, thinking finally changes. By addressing the mental side as well as the physical side, coaches target the fear or frustration at its core, therefore obtaining results faster. It's important to note that the fastest way to work your athlete through a block is to combine progressions, repetitions, and mental training simultaneously.

#1: Progressions

First thing to do when your athlete has a block or is continuously is break the element down to the progression they can complete successfully. Whatever that progression is, doing it over and over will help them gain confidence and correct the bad habit. It may be doing a single for a double or another type of drill. Have them do the progression as many times as they can until they feel ready to increase to the next level of difficulty. Keep increasing difficulty until they either feel confident attempting the element or combination again, or they can complete to element with proper body position. If they pop, have them go back to the last successful progression and repeat the process. Popping is a habit! It's better to have your athlete do the less difficult progression numerous times successfully, then train them to stop. Teach them to attempt the skill even if the entry does not feel "perfect". We all know, it rarely does.

#2: Repetitions

Along with the progressions, it's essential they do numbers, numbers, numbers! Keep them training each element and progression until they can perform them easily without fear. Numbers will help them feel more confident which in turn changes their thinking about the skill. After so many repetitions, they will begin to say, "I can do this", rather than "I'm gonna stop".

#3: Tools to Tighten the Mind

Progressions and repetitions can't break the block or popping habit alone. Dealing with the problem directly will help the block break easier and faster. The best way to break the block cycle is combining progressions, repetitions, and tight mind tools. Here are the three most effective mental tools to break the block.

Mental Choreography

I have written before in about the importance of mental choreography (MC) or "key thoughts". MC more than any other tool helps to tighten the mind. Think of MC as blinders for the mind. MC keeps the athlete's mind "locked down" so that distraction or doubt cannot interfere with focus. Help them create key thoughts that they say to themselves for any skill that is blocked. Have them say those thoughts in their head whenever they do the skill or the progression. Saying cue words in their head as they skate into and perform the element is extremely important. As they do each progression and repetition, it's essential they say their Mental Choreography words. The key thoughts will help them train their body to complete the skill automatically. Have them do repetitions of off-ice walk throughs while saying their mental choreography key words.

Visualization

What you think is what you do. Having your athletes imagine themselves doing the skill over and over again is one way to break the block cycle. Instruct them to practice seeing themselves complete the element perfectly. Be sure they do their mental choreography words every time they visualize the element. This pairs the words they say with completing the skill. In addition to visualizing, have your athletes walk through the skill they are blocking on. Have them move their body through each of the body positions required for the skill while saying mental choreography. Instruct them to feel their body doing the skill as much as possible. Be sure they complete each body position from start to finish.

Anchors

It's important athletes are aware when their mind is loose and off track. Their mind must be anchored strong and steady to stay on course in the storm of negative thinking. Just as your athletes pull their body back to proper position to make a technical correction, they can pull their mind back the same way by using an anchor.

An anchor is a series of thoughts or actions that pull the mind back to focus and doubtlessness. An anchor is strong "come-backs" to negative thoughts. These thoughts help return the athlete's mind to focus, fearlessness, and doubtlessness. Examples of strong anchors include: "breathe, stay on course, I can do this", "breathe, tight mind, don't go there", or "relax, keep it cool, it's no big deal." Each anchor statement should include breathing and positive self-talk. Anchors should break the downward spiral of frustration, fear, or nervousness, and get the athlete's mind back on course. Whenever they feel a block coming on, they can use their anchor to move them toward a positive place. Notice when their mind is loose and "re-mind" them to do their anchors to pull it back.

Remember to keep it cool.

Breaking the block is something all figure skaters can do. It's important for coaches to keep positive. Stress feeds the Block Beast. It is helpful for coaches to model and mirror the state of mind they want their athletes to be in. Many times coaches make the mistake of meeting an athlete's mood instead of leading them to a more productive space. For example, many coaches react with frustration when an athlete is experiencing extreme frustration. When this happens, athlete and coach fuel each other in negative ways. Model the behavior you want your athletes to have. Reinforcing doubtlessness is a good way to break down a block. Blocks respond faster to an expectation of, "I know you will work through this", "Today is just an off day, let's go back to the progression," and "It's coming easier and easier every day". Blocks feed on emotional reactions. Being non-emotional, confident, and expressing belief in your athlete will help them have the courage they need to beat the block.

Remember to take the three-handed approach to beating the block. Combining progressions, repetitions, and mental tools will help you and your athlete break through blocks before they break you.

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