

INTRODUCTION

WHAT'S CLUTCH?

WHAT DOES IT mean to be clutch? Most sports fans are pretty sure they know the answer. But consider these 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 sent the Celtics to 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.

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

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, 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. The reason is 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 somehow willing yourself to greatness. After all, every professional athlete is mentally tough or he wouldn't have made it that far. For that matter, every chief executive of a company has shown leadership to get where he is. But that does not mean he 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.

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 in writing this book 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.

THE QUEST FOR CLUTCH

When I set out to discover what made some people great under pressure, I had few preconceived ideas about the subject. My goal was to find people who were clutch across a range of professions and deconstruct what made them so good. Instead of devising a series of tests, I hit the road. The one thing I knew for sure was that no one had ever been clutch under laboratory conditions. I also had a healthy skepticism of the existing theories that purported to explain how people could become

better under pressure. For one, most of them carried New Agey names that made my skin crawl. I distrusted the idea that your mind was an extra club in your golf bag, that putting yourself in the zone (wherever that was) would do much good, or that the “mental edge” was something sharp. I had interviewed or met enough great athletes to know that their minds were not always their greatest assets. The reverse was true for business leaders: I’d interviewed some very smart, interesting people who were doing less than I thought they could be doing and, conversely, some real buffoons who were running the show. I was pretty sure that the link between intelligence and rank at many companies was not always there, and I had no idea if the two had any correlation with a person’s ability to perform under pressure.

On the other end of the scale, I was equally skeptical of finely crafted academic studies after my time as a graduate student at the University of Chicago in the mid-1990s. I was studying history, but I became fascinated by the success and stature of the Chicago School of Economics. My adviser’s office was one floor above where Gary Becker, one of the school’s many Nobel Prize winners, taught a class. I often had to wade through a crowd of eager students surrounding him when his class let out. Becker had won his Nobel for his work on the idea of “rational choice,” an elegant concept that says, given the right incentives, people will act in the most productive ways. His work on marriage, labor choices, and criminal behavior is fascinating, but after some fifteen years as a business journalist, I came to see the flaws in the theory. Just because someone was well educated did not mean he was going to make the most rational choices about his job or his family. And if a theory created by someone as brilliant as Becker could be dinged in practice, I didn’t have a lot of faith in sports psychologists and gurus of peak performance.

So I did what a reporter does when he has some questions. I found people who excelled under pressure and spent time with them. I observed them in pressure-filled situations. I sat with them. I interviewed them over and over again. I studied their past successes and failures. I looked over bits of research and turned to literature. But most of all, I asked them how they performed as they did. Many couldn’t answer this question satisfactorily, so I spent more time with them and asked more

questions. The result is this book, which looks at the good, the bad, and the surprising things people do under pressure.

CONFESSIONS OF A CHOKER

Long before I sat across from Tiger Woods, or even contemplated writing this book, clutch performers fascinated me. As a kid, I wasn't much of an athlete, but I was a great student, which meant much more to my future. I grew up in a rough neighborhood in an economically depressed town in western Massachusetts. My parents divorced and then spent the rest of my childhood hating each other, something they were wildly successful at doing. It sounds like the setup to a sentimental afternoon movie, but it was pretty grim then. My grandfather realized the pickle I was in and pushed me to apply to a nearby prep school. I was accepted, given financial aid, and with each test I passed, I began to move away from that childhood. From entrance exams and scholarship meetings to personal challenges and job interviews later in life, I had no choice but to be clutch. If I choked, I had no backup plan. So, I went forward. I learned to stay calm and remain articulate when it counted, but mostly I pressed ahead. Because of this, I've lived a much better life than I could have ever imagined as a kid coming home to an empty apartment on a truly bleak street. (My only friend in the neighborhood robbed our apartment when he turned sixteen!) Without really thinking about it in these terms then, I had to be clutch to get out.

But there has always been one area of my life where I have been a world-class choke artist: golf. It may seem like a minor thing, but this was the sport my grandfather taught me on the public courses he played with his friends. Our bond grew over the thousands of hours we spent out there together. I loved the discussions we had; he loved the sight of me hitting soaring tee shots to parts of the fairway he had never reached. I could hit those shots with him. I could hit them, too, on the driving range, where most every shot was crisp and accurate. But tournaments were a different story. I choked, sometimes mildly, sometimes in a soul-crushing way. Once I was eight up with ten holes left to play. For nongolfers, this

meant I didn't have to win any more holes, just tie two and I would win the match. I lost all ten and was eliminated from the tournament. A similar moment came in a citywide junior tournament where I had played so well on the first nine holes that I was sure I was in the lead. I ran into the clubhouse to call my grandfather, and he rushed over to watch me finish. But before he got there, my game had started to fall apart, and I was lucky to finish in the middle of the pack. My prize that day—three golf balls—was worth less than my entry fee.

My choking streak has continued into adulthood, as I've turned in poor performances on most of the prestigious courses where I've been invited to play. I'll always remember the first hole at Oakmont Country Club, site of eight U.S. Opens. I hit my drive out-of-bounds—the only out-of-bounds on the entire course. When I had a great round going at The Country Club in Brookline, I put my final tee shot on the driving range—a place few ever see from that angle. It is even worse when I'm asked to play in a member-guest tournament. One of my wife's colleagues said her husband was thrilled to have me join his team at Kittansett Country Club, a gorgeous seaside course in Marion, Massachusetts. I had played a lot of golf that spring and I was regularly shooting in the mid-70s. He was convinced we were going to whoop the competition; we finished second to last. The list goes on, interminably. Yet put me on my home course or out with friends, and I'll shoot one of the low scores that keeps my handicap a single digit. It drives me crazy.

THE ROUTE TO BEING CLUTCH

My golf course frustration drove my initial (selfish) interest in the idea of a book about being clutch. I became more serious about the subject as I began thinking more deeply about clutch performers and why they could do what so many of us cannot do: react in a pressure-filled situation the way they would act normally. Throughout this, I clung to the same two questions. The first was, Why are some people so much better under pressure than other, seemingly equally talented people?

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. What was most intriguing about interviewing them was so few thought of themselves as clutch. This astonished me because we are a country that lionizes performers who come through under pressure.

The first part of the book is the result of my quest to discover the key traits that make people clutch; I found five. I began by looking at focus, the basis for all great performances under pressure. The second trait is discipline, which in chapter 2 I look at through the stories of a psychiatrist and a banker in make-or-break situations. Chapter 3 discusses the need for adaptability by examining Special Forces leaders and Secret Service agents in the field. The need to be present—and block out everything else—is told in chapter 4 through an actor preparing for the stage role of a lifetime. Chapter 5 looks at the fear and desire that drive entrepreneurs to succeed under the constant pressure of their businesses. Chapter 6 applies all of these principles to what I call the double-clutch moment: when a woman beats a man at his own game, be it sports or business. In those victories, there is much more at stake because of the perception that women cannot be clutch.

Of course, 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. They fascinate us, largely because we expect high achievers to do so much better. If the clutch performers didn't think of themselves as clutch, the opposite was true for chokers: Before their fall, they held themselves in very high esteem. The second part of the book looks not only at the seemingly star performers who choke under pressure but at the three traits all chokers have. The first is an inability to accept responsibility for what they have done when something goes wrong. I illustrate this in chapter 7 through two tales of the financial crisis. In chapter 8, I look at how overthinking an opportunity can paralyze a person under pressure and cause him to choke just when everyone else thinks he will come through. In chapter 9, I talk about overconfidence

by examining the common characteristics of leaders who bring down major companies—and have spawned an entire industry to deal with their mistakes.

This brought me to the second question I wanted answered: Can people be clutch if they are not regularly in high-pressure situations? The answer is yes, and I show how in the third part of the book. Chapter 10 is about a businessman who found himself in a financial bind he did not cause and looks at the series of painful decisions he had to make—or risk losing everything he had built. In chapter 11, I focus on a professional golfer who had been making his way on the PGA Tour without a victory and suddenly found himself leading a major tournament on the last day. Their stories illustrate the two areas where people choke the most—with money and in sports—and explain how all of us can learn to make better decisions under pressure. This, at the end of the day, is the goal of *Clutch*: to show people how to become better under pressure and avoid the simple mistakes that cause most of us to choke.