



I keep choking in pickleball.

What's really going on?



You're not broken.

You're not weak.

And you didn't suddenly forget how to play pickleball.

That is one of the first things to understand about choking under pressure. It feels as if your game has vanished. It feels as if some cruel little pickleball goblin has run off with your serve, your dink, your hands, and possibly your dignity.

“ But your skill is still there. The problem is that you no longer have clean access to it. ”

What's really going on is this:

“ When the point starts to matter, your attention shifts from playing the point to surviving the result. ”

That is a huge change.

A moment earlier, you were just playing. You were seeing the ball, moving to it, hitting it, recovering, and responding. You were inside the game.

Then the score changed.

Now it is 9-9.

Or 10-10.

Or you are serving for the match.

Or you have a lead you are afraid to lose.

Or your partner has gone quiet in that special way partners go quiet when they are trying not to look disappointed.

And suddenly you are no longer simply playing the ball.

You are carrying the result.



FUTURE-NOISE CHECKLIST

- What if I miss?
- What if we lose?
- What if my partner gets annoyed?
- What if I blow this lead?
- What if I pop this up?
- What if I double fault?
- What if everybody can see that I'm tightening up?

Once that happens, your freedom begins to disappear.

In Fluid Motion Factor terms, you have left the present moment and moved into outcome-consciousness. You are no longer in direct relationship with the ball. You are in relationship with the imagined consequence of missing the ball.



The Bossy CEO Takes the Court

Pressure invites micromanagement



That is when the prefrontal cortex, the brain's bossy CEO, jumps in like an over-caffeinated assistant coach with a clipboard.

It starts giving instructions:

- Be careful.
- Don't miss.
- Get this in.
- Keep it low.
- Don't mess up the serve.
- Don't hit it long.
- Don't disappoint your partner.
- Do something smart.
- Do something safe.
- Do something, for heaven's sake.

The conscious mind thinks it is helping. It thinks it is protecting you. It thinks that if it supervises the body closely enough, disaster can be avoided.

“ But pickleball does not respond well to panic management. ”

The body needs freedom to play. It needs access to timing, feel, rhythm, balance, touch, and adjustment. Those things do not usually improve when the mind starts shouting instructions from the control tower.

WHAT PRESSURE DOES TO THE SHOT

- The dink gets careful.
- The serve gets guided.
- The return gets pushed.
- The volley gets poked.
- The hand tightens.
- The feet get late.
- The paddle face becomes a math problem.
- Time speeds up.

And now the very thing you were trying to prevent becomes more likely.



You were trying not to miss.

But “trying not to miss” is not the same as playing.

Trying not to miss often changes the whole character of the shot. You stop letting the body hit the ball, and you start trying to steer the ball safely through the air with your conscious mind.

“ That is choking. ”

Not because you lack courage.

Not because you lack discipline.

Not because you need to “want it more.”

You choke because the importance of the result has captured your attention and tightened your system.

Your body still knows the shot.

***“ But your mind has put a customs
checkpoint between your skill and the ball. ”***



What Am I Misunderstanding?

Winning is the DNA goal. Freedom is the usable goal.



The misunderstanding is that you think the goal is to win this point.

Of course you want to win the point.

That is natural.

That is already built in.

You do not need to remind yourself that winning would be nice. You do not need to walk to the baseline and say, “I would prefer not to donate this serve to the neighboring court.” The preference is already there.

In Fluid Motion Factor language, winning is the DNA goal.

It is part of the game’s basic structure. You step on the court, and the desire to win is already baked into the activity. It does not need to be installed every three seconds like a nervous software update.

The deeper question is this:

“ What goal actually helps you play better? ”

The answer is not “win this point.”

The answer is freedom.

Freedom is the performance goal.

Winning is the DNA goal.

Freedom is the usable goal.

When you make winning the conscious goal during a pressure point, your mind starts chasing the finish line. It leaps ahead to the outcome. It wants the point to be over, safely deposited in the correct column, preferably with no embarrassing footage available.

“ But the body cannot play from the finish line. The body can only play from now. ”

This is the misunderstanding at the heart of choking:

You think the pressure point requires more control.

Actually, it requires more freedom.



You think the answer is to become tougher.

Often, the answer is to become less trapped.

You think you need to force yourself to concentrate harder.

But concentration that feels like gripping a steering wheel in a snowstorm usually makes the body tighter.

You do not need more strain.

You need a better relationship with the moment.



Freedom Is Access

Not wildness. Not carelessness. Access.



The point is not asking you to guarantee the outcome. That is impossible. You cannot guarantee that you will win the rally. You cannot guarantee your opponent will miss. You cannot guarantee the ball will clip the tape and fall over instead of dying there like a tiny yellow-green tragedy.

What you can do is stay available.

AVAILABLE TO PLAY

- Available to see the ball.
- Available to move.
- Available to feel the paddle.
- Available to let the hand soften.
- Available to let the body respond.
- Available to keep playing instead of surviving.

That is freedom.

Freedom does not mean wildness. It does not mean careless hitting. It does not mean pretending the score does not exist.

“Freedom means you are not imprisoned by the score.”

You can still choose a smart shot. You can still play high percentage pickleball. You can still return deep, dink crosscourt, reset the ball, or attack when the ball is attackable.

But the choice comes from clarity rather than fear.

That is the difference.

FEAR VS. FREEDOM

Fear says	Freedom says
“Don’t miss.”	“See the ball.”
“Don’t lose this.”	“Play this.”
“Protect the result.”	“Let the body hit the shot.”



One shrinks you.

The other gives you back to yourself.





What's Your One Key Correction?

Play for freedom, not for the finish line.



That is the correction.

On the next pressure point, do not ask:

“ How do I make sure I win this? ”

That question seems logical, but it usually pulls you into the future. It turns the point into a negotiation with fear. It makes your mind reach for control, and once that happens, the body often loses its natural timing.

Ask a better question:

“ Can I stay free right here? ”

That question brings you back to the present.

Not the match.

Not the score.

Not your partner's mood.

Not the possible embarrassment.

Not the imagined disaster.

Right here.

This ball.

This breath.

This contact.

This is where your game actually lives.

BEFORE THE NEXT PRESSURE POINT

Before the next pressure point, slow your walk. Give yourself one or two extra seconds. Feel your feet on the court. Let your shoulders drop. Feel the paddle in your hand. Soften your eyes so you are not staring at the ball like it owes you money. Let your vision widen. Let the court come back into proportion.

Then make the game simple.

- Let the ball come to you.



- Acknowledge it.
- Stay on your side of the net.
- Do not mentally chase the point to its conclusion.
- Do not live in the score.
- Do not try to drag the ball safely into the future.
- Just play this ball with as much freedom as you can allow.

That is enough.

Not because you will always win the point.

You won't.

Nobody does.

But because this gives you the best chance of playing the point with the skill you already have.



The Cue

Freedom first. Score second.



A simple cue is:

YOUR CUE

Freedom first. Score second.

That cue does not deny the score.

It puts the score in its proper place.

The score is information.

Freedom is access.

“ And under pressure, access is everything. ”

So when you feel yourself tightening, do not scold yourself. Do not give yourself a lecture. Do not try to become a tougher, grittier, more heroic version of yourself, wearing an invisible headband and marching into battle with a plastic paddle.

Just return to freedom.

RETURN TO FREEDOM

- Soft eyes.
- Easy hand.
- This ball.

“ The beginning of un-choking is not becoming more forceful. It is becoming less trapped. ”

