

# Loss is not always 'choking'

IT'S easy to dismiss the Proteas' semifinal defeat to India as another choke. It's tempting though, given the statistic that we have now failed to win a knockout match in 14 years.

But it's also wrong. Failing to win big matches is not necessarily choking, and choking is not a synonym for losing. There's no doubt that the Proteas are historical tournament under-performers, and this must be addressed. But this may only be possible if we can discard a label that may actually be responsible for holding our own team back.

Technically, choking is overthinking a skill to the point where what should be implicit becomes explicit. Expert skill execution requires very little thought — it is an automatic process, where thought is directed towards tactics and strategy rather than the mechanical execution of the skill.

For instance, Novak Djokovic is no longer worried about his feet or

wrist position when he lines up a cross-court winner. He once was, perhaps at the age of twelve, but having mastered the skill, it has become automatic, unconscious. Choking is the reversal of that mastery. It undoes expert performance because pressure forces too much thought, which interferes with execution.

This triggers a slide into relative incompetence, because the natural response is more thought, and more tension, greater clumsiness and even more errors.

Some famous examples of this include Greg Norman's collapse at the 1996 Masters, in which a six-shot advantage became a five-shot deficit in the final round.

In 1993, Jana Novotna lost a 4-1, 40-30 lead in Wimbledon's final set against Steffi Graf. A double-fault triggered her reversal from expert to amateur, and she lost the next five games in a flurry of errors and double faults to go down 6-4 before crying inconsolably on the Duchess



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of Kent's shoulder (to her credit, she conquered her demons to win Wimbledon in 1998).

Many point to the infamous semifinal run-out of Allan Donald in the 1999 World Cup as the prime example of SA cricket's choking. I'd suggest it was the exact opposite — panic, the definition of which always includes mention of unthinking behaviour, and is thus the polar opposite of a choke. That was a moment in which, with four balls to go and one run required, the ability to step away from the pressure and think more may have

prevented the disastrous outcome.

Unfortunately, the choking label was applied and has stuck. The problem is threefold. First, it forces players to constantly confront the unfair label. The player walks onto the field thinking about not choking, which means they're doing exactly what would have caused it to begin with.

Second, when we create a perception that we only ever lose because we choke, it discredits opposition performances. This leads to 'blindness' that prevents learning. After all, why seek improvement and innovation when all you have to do is stop choking? There is much to learn from better teams.

And third, the unintended consequence is the creation of an altogether new problem, which I suspect is a far more likely explanation for our repeated cricket failures. It is called stereotype threat and is defined, academically, as being at risk of conforming to a negative stereotype about one's

social group.

Stereotypes constrain people to behave in a certain way. For example, studies show that women or black populations underperform in maths tasks if they're first told that men or white populations are superior at maths. In tests of athleticism, the opposite is true — white athletes underperform if they're first led to believe they're inferior. Without such reminders, there is no difference in performance, and it doesn't matter if the stereotype is true or not, but rather how a label is perceived.

Now, consider the stereotype of the South African cricketer. You have to win, or you'll be labelled a choker, regardless of the context. The normal response to knowing that others believe you cannot perform in knockout tournaments is to underperform in knockout tournaments. A perfect self-fulfilling prophecy. The sooner it is discarded, the sooner we can turn around the 14-year fall.

## Bekele conquers Paris

ETHIOPIA'S legendary runner Kenenisa Bekele notched up another impressive milestone in an already glittering career by winning the Paris Marathon yesterday, his first attempt at the gruelling event.

The 31-year-old 5 000m and 10 000m world record holder crossed the line in a record time of 2hrs 5mins 02secs after negotiating 42.195km through the streets of Paris. The previous Paris record was held by Kenya's Stanley Wiyott, who clocked 2:05:10 in 2012.

Fellow Ethiopian Limenih Getachew came home second in 2:06:49 with Luka Kanda of Kenya, the 2012 Rome winner, claiming the final spot on the podium after crossing the line in 2:08:02.

"It was my first marathon and I didn't have much experience," said Bekele, the triple Olympic champion. "It was very tough but it was the time I expected. After 25km I pushed alone but it was very tough."

Bekele emulated his great

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compatriot Haile Gebreselassie, who also made a successful step from the track to marathon and has the third-fastest time in history. Bekele made his move with about 25km to go to open up a lead that may have been even more significant had he not struggled with a hamstring problem.

"The hamstring wasn't good after 25km. It was cramping but it's OK. I'll feel it more in the morning," explained Bekele.

He missed out on the world record held by Kenyan Wilson Kipsang who set a mark of 2:3:23 in 2013 in Berlin. "At 5km from the finish, my hamstring cramped up again. I couldn't accelerate. I think in future, I'll do better but it's very positive."

In the women's race, Kenya's Flomena Cheyech dominated



**CROWD-PULLER:** Competitors on the Champs-Élysées at the start of the 38th Paris Marathon yesterday. Ethiopia's Kenenisa Bekele won in impressive style  
Picture: THOMAS SAMSON/AFP

proceedings, winning in a time of 2:22:41 as she turned in a confident showing with a winning margin of 3:37secs over Ethiopia's Yebrgual Melese. A second Ethiopian, Ahmed Zemzem, was a further 3:14secs back in third place.

"I'm very happy, the course was good," said a delighted Cheyech. "I

wasn't that fast but in the middle of the race, I felt confident and just told myself to keep running."

The victory for five-time world champion Bekele caps a stunning comeback from a debilitating calf injury which kept him out of competition for nearly three years.

Last September, he defeated

Gebreselassie and his track rival Mo Farah in his comeback race at the Great North run in England — his half-marathon debut — out-kicking Farah in sprint for the line. Farah, who won Olympic gold medals at the 2012 London Games, makes his marathon debut in London next week. — AFP

## Briefs

### Aspell joins jockey revolt at Aintree

GRAND National-winning jockey Leighton Aspell was involved in a jockey's rebellion at Aintree after Pineau de Re's 25-1 success on Saturday.

All but one of the 40 jockeys who rode in the National refused to cooperate with a stewards inquiry into farcical scenes at the start of the world-famous steeplechase, when the riders attempted to form a line before the off time. — AFP

### Kuchar heads Houston field

MATT Kuchar fired a four-under par 68 on Saturday to take a four-shot lead into the final round of the US PGA Tour Houston Open.

He was four strokes in front of overnight leader Sergio Garcia, who settled for a one-over 73. — AFP

### Bayern taste first loss since 2012

BAYERN Munich suffered their first Bundesliga defeat since 2012 on Saturday as their record 53-match unbeaten league run was ended by a 1-0 defeat at Augsburg.

Bayern were beaten for the first time in the German league since going down 2-1 at home to Bayer Leverkusen on October 28 2012. — AFP

### Coetzee thinks he still has right stuff

STORMERS' coach Allister Coetzee believes he is still the man to take the team forward despite a 22-11 defeat at the hands of the Waratahs at Newlands on Saturday.

"I have confidence to turn this around," Coetzee said. — Craig Ray

### Ackermann left hunting for answers

THE Crusaders' 28-7 victory over the Lions has left the Gauteng team's coach searching for answers.

"If you think about the tries they scored and the mistakes we made, they weren't as dangerous as the score reflects," Johan Ackermann said. — Liam del Carme