

THE FEARLESS LACROSSE GOALIE

HOW TO MASTER THE MIND
AND WIN MORE GAMES

CONNOR HOLLISON



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About the Author: Connor Hollison

Connor Hollison is a veteran of the crease whose mental toughness was forged across the highest levels of competitive lacrosse.

His career path was dedicated to pressure, leading him from Park City High School (2015–2017) to the intense national training environment of IMG Academy (2017–2019). This led directly to his role as a Division I goalie at the University of Utah (2019–2024).

Navigating career-threatening setbacks and experiencing the ultimate isolation of the position, his core philosophy was cemented in the DI cage: mental mastery is not optional; it is the only way to survive in the game of lacrosse.

Connor is the Founder of Adaptive Goaltending, a platform dedicated to providing systematic and personalized training for lacrosse goalies all over the world. For over seven years, he has applied the strategic lessons learned from his toughest moments to develop championship-caliber mindsets in goalies.

He wrote this book because he believes that mental toughness is a systematic skill that can be taught. He provides direct, actionable strategies to help every lacrosse goalie reject the blame game, embrace the Goldfish Mentality, and transform potential into undeniable performance. He dedicates his life to giving lacrosse goalies the mental edge they need to win the battle between their ears.

Introduction: The Anatomy of a Lacrosse Goalie

The psychology of a lacrosse goalie is as complex as it is fascinating, and if you choose to play this position, one question constantly follows you: "Why did you choose to play goalie?"

On the surface, choosing this position is absurd. It is an act of willingly subjecting yourself to immense pressure and undeniable negatives. You are significantly less involved in the run-of-play from a physical standpoint, yet you must endure an immense amount of physical pain. Worst of all, the consequence of one single mistake you make can be absolutely fatal to the outcome of a game. That's a lot of pressure, and that's a lot of negativity. Any good lacrosse goalie acknowledges these struggles.

However, there is something about the lacrosse crease that captures the mind of a select few. Many lacrosse goalies don't just endure the struggle; they revel in it. They live it, and they love it.

From an outside perspective, a person like this appears simply crazy, like there is something fundamentally wrong with them. But for the lacrosse goalie, the motivation is pure: stealing that last opportunity or making that unthinkable save is the inspiration. It's the thrill that inspires them to sacrifice their body and do whatever it takes to keep that small white ball from crossing the goal line.

These concepts will be explored in depth throughout this book. We will analyze the anecdotes of elite-level lacrosse goalies to answer all of the burning questions about the psychology of a lacrosse goalie and what it takes to maximize mental performance inside and outside of the cage.

You will have the opportunity to learn what these goalies do to set themselves up for success, why they do what they do, and how they execute their process. I strongly believe that this book will be an invaluable resource for the lacrosse goalie community, and

will even benefit athletes in completely different sports.

Chapter 1: Andrew McMinn: The Stoic Competitor

The philosophy of Andrew McMinn is built on calculated simplicity. This mindset was forged through two decades in the highest levels of lacrosse, first as a standout goalie at Providence where he earned three All-MAAC selections, and now as a two-time ASUN Coach of the Year at Utah Lacrosse, where he has consistently led the Utes to conference championships and NCAA appearances. For McMinn, the elite performance of the Stoic Competitor isn't about feeling great; it's about controlling the few things you can control, and letting nothing, absolutely nothing, rattle your core foundation.

His career, which includes mentoring over 30 professional lacrosse players, proves one essential truth: you do not need a complex psychological system. You need an unshakable, repeatable process that anchors you in the moment when everyone else is crumbling.

Weaponizing Your Mind

When the pressure is mounting before a game, what is your defense? McMinn's answer is brilliant because it's so simple. It is built on two core pillars that serve as his ultimate pre-game mental trigger: music and visualization.

McMinn's routine begins by simply listening to his favorite music. This isn't just background noise. It's a reliable sensory cue, a form of conditioning that programs his mind.

By consistently pairing that specific audio input with the act of preparing to compete, McMinn trains his mind to associate the music with a state of peak focus and aggression. It flips the switch instantly. It's a reliable trigger that cuts through pre-game anxiety, overrides the noise, and ensures he arrives at the crease ready for the inevitable fight.

The second step is the visualization itself. McMinin creates a personal highlight reel of absolute dominance. He plays back perfect games in his mind, watching himself make flawless, dominating saves, throwing pinpoint clears, and owning the entirety of the crease.

This technique is powerful because it's essentially "tricking" your brain into confidence. The difference between feeling capable and feeling truly confident is often just belief, and by presenting your subconscious with visual evidence of your best self, you are solidifying your belief in your ability to perform. McMinin uses this to plant a seed of total self-belief: you are fully capable of everything you are seeing. The missing component, in his view, is rarely competence, but complete confidence.

Locking In for All Four Quarters

Staying locked in for an entire game is a challenge that breaks most goalies. You spend large portions of the game waiting, and if you don't have a strategy for those long offensive possessions, your mind will drift to past mistakes, future worries, or outside distractions. McMinin attacks this problem head-on with active focus.

McMinin combats the mental vacuum by actively tracking the ball on the offensive side of the field. This action forces him to stay engaged, but his ultimate tool against distraction is the simple, repetitive mantra: "ball, ball, ball" or "just focus on the ball."

This is not idle chatter. It is a simple, powerful strategy. The reality is, our minds cannot naturally maintain sustained focus over long periods of low action. By repeating a mantra, McMinin is giving his mind a simple, repetitive command that drowns out the noise. It leaves no room for the corrosive, negative self-talk that often creeps in: the doubts, the worries about consequences, and the fear of failure. It is simple, effective, and absolutely effective for maximizing attention span during a game.

McMinin's philosophy on tracking and reading shots is a definitive stand against over-analysis: his default approach is to keep his focus entirely on the ball and ignore the shooter entirely.

For lacrosse goalies at the youth level, this is gospel. You have no business trying to predict, bait, or manipulate a shooter if you haven't mastered the fundamental job: seeing and saving the ball.

McMinn only evolves this approach when he has reliable, repeatable intelligence. If he were playing against the same shooters multiple times, and an attackman always shot low-to-low from the wing, then he would mentally prepare to drop low quickly. He cautions that this is a calculated risk based on known tendencies, not guesswork. If you don't know the shooter's pattern, you default to the pure, ball-focused reaction.

Stoicism and Shared Burden

For McMinn, the true measure of a competitor is not in the saves you make, but in the goals you let in. The Goldfish Mentality, the ability to move on instantly, is mandatory, and he achieves it through a commitment to bodily control.

McMinn's physical reaction to a goal is intentionally stoic. There is no stomping of the feet, no stick slam, and no head hung low. Why? Because an outward display of frustration signals to your own brain that the emotion is taking over, preventing the mental reset. It's a conscious effort to detach from the immediate outcome and signal to his internal self that it's time to move on.

This physical detachment is cemented by his personal ritual. After a goal, McMinn would sometimes take a few seconds to stare at the ball or ritualistically throw it up to himself three times. This simple, repetitive physical cue was his hard reset, a deliberate action to "turn off the emotional part of my brain." This action breaks the cycle of negative thoughts, clears the mind, and transforms the painful moment of a goal into a trigger for a positive, disciplined routine. Immediately after the ritual, his focus snaps back to the only thing that matters: the next shot.

McMinn's most transformative lesson came from handling his greatest adversity: losing the conference semi-finals as a sophomore.

He felt a massive burden, believing his poor performance was the singular reason the seniors on his team had just played their last

college game. The silence in the locker room was suffocating. Every pair of eyes felt like a mirror reflecting the scoreboard's finality. McMinn was swallowed by a corrosive mix of shame, anger, and guilt. He felt responsible not just for the loss, but for ending the competitive dreams of the guys who had given everything to the program. The weight was immense, confirming the common lie the goalie tells himself: I am the only reason we failed. This emotional spiral is the most dangerous trap in the position, and it's where his coach had to step in immediately to prevent permanent damage.

His coach, seeing the destructive weight of this mentality, intervened with a career-defining question: "Do you feel like you were the only reason we won every single game this season?" McMinn, of course, answered 'no.'

The coach's point was profound: if you cannot be the only reason the team wins, you can never, ever be the only reason the team loses. This perspective completely shifted his career. It allowed him to process what had happened and move forward by realizing that his worth was not defined by one moment or one loss, but by his willingness to show up and do the work.

This is the ultimate perspective needed for longevity: the loss is a shared burden, and your value is in your daily effort, not the final score.

Confidence, Communication, and Legacy

McMinn's commitment to self-belief translates directly into his role as a coach.

To maintain confidence under pressure, he continuously plays his visualization highlight reel. He understands that this mental conditioning is the fastest way to solidify self-belief and put his mind in the correct state to lead his team to success.

As a leader, he stresses the critical impact of physical communication. His stoic, confident demeanor has a massive impact on his team. They are watching you. If they see you visibly shaken or frustrated, their confidence shatters. By controlling his body language and reacting to every dropped pass or goal with calm

authority, he signals to his entire team that he is still in command, and there is no need to spiral.

He demands communication from his team at all times, delivering instructions in a positive and confident tone.

Andrew McMinn's legacy is that of the ultimate professional. He showed that you don't need fancy, complicated systems to be elite. You need discipline, a simple, non-negotiable routine, and the unwavering belief that your effort, not the scoreboard, defines your value.

Chapter 2: Thomas Haitsma: The Global Mindset

The psychology of an elite lacrosse goalie is often presumed to be a product of hotbeds like Maryland or upstate New York. But Thomas Haitsma, the starting goalie for the Netherlands National Team, proves that the mindset can be forged anywhere. His journey began uniquely in 2009 after his family moved to Brussels, where he found the game through his younger brother. Starting as a midfielder, he was quickly hooked, making the switch to the cage after just one season.

Haitsma's path has never been easy. Coming from a non-traditional European nation, he faced massive challenges: learning the position, securing proper coaching, and simply finding the proper equipment. The struggle for resources and exposure only enhanced his focus and forced him to become an intensely self-aware, analytical competitor. His success, including being voted the Most Valuable Defensive Player for the Dutch national team at the 2018 World Championships, is a testament to mastering the mental game against all odds.

For Haitsma, consistency is the key, allowing him to balance his energy, moving from loose and relaxed to hyper-focused and ready to compete.

The Balance of Focus and Release

Haitsma knows that stepping onto the field too tense can be just as fatal as being too casual. His pre-game routine is a calculated exercise in managing that energy balance.

In the locker room, he prioritizes keeping things light by joking around with his teammates. That social interaction serves as a release valve, managing the initial buildup of nerves and preventing the pressure from building into an internal, destructive force. A relaxed mind is a clear mind.

Once geared up, he transitions into his individual rituals, utilizing sensory cues to dial in his focus:

- **Visualization:** Similar to McMinn, he creates a personal highlight reel in his mind, visualizing successful plays: "I picture myself reading plays, making key saves, and executing clean, confident clears. This mental rehearsal helps me stay sharp and anticipate different scenarios, so when they happen on the field, I feel prepared and in control."
- **The Juggling Cue:** A unique part of his routine is juggling, which he finds "incredibly calming." As he juggles, his entire concentration is forced onto the minute details of the ball, helping him tune out distractions and dial in the hand-eye coordination he needs for the next few hours.
- **Physical Anchor:** He chews caffeine gum not just for the energy boost, but for the act of chewing itself, which helps him maintain a locked-in mindset.

By the time he's done, he has gone from a loose, relaxed teammate to a calm, hyper-focused machine, ready to perform at his best.

Using Communication as Focus

During the game, Haitsma combats the inevitable mental vacuum by turning his communication into his ultimate tool for remaining present and locked-in.

He actively tracks the ball when it's on the offensive side of the field, but what keeps his mind from drifting is the constant analysis and command of the field. This active participation forces him to suppress distractions.

While other goalies bark out direct commands, Haitsma prefers an approach that forces accountability from his defense. He likes to encourage dialogue instead of simply commanding roles.

For example, instead of immediately identifying the open man and yelling, "Daniel, you're my hot!" he will ask the unit, "Who's my hot?" This subtle difference is a tactical move: it forces the defense to respond and communicate, ensuring that the entire unit is on the same mental page. It pushes the responsibility away from

centralizing all communication through the goalie, encouraging collective mental engagement.

He also insists on a quick, mandatory huddle after every goal. This prevents the team from dwelling on the goal and immediately shifts the mental focus to what they can do better on the next play.

Haitsma knows that higher-level shooters are deceptive, so he relies primarily on experience and visual cues. He notes that a shooter's true intentions are often revealed by their shoulders and hips (shoulders high, shot high; hips right, shot right).

To practice this, he actively trains by watching film and having his shooters mimic specific plays and situations. This builds a mental library of visual cues and corresponding muscle memory reactions, allowing him to anticipate certain situations without guessing.

Attacking Negative Thoughts

The pressure of playing for a national team, especially one competing on the global stage, is intense. Haitsma had a moment in 2024 where he found himself spiraling mid-game. Negative self-talk convinced him he wasn't working hard enough and was letting in "easy" goals, making it impossible to break out of the downward spiral.

His solution, learned through mental performance counseling, is one of the most effective cognitive tools a lacrosse goalie can have: The Good Bucket and The Bad Bucket.

The Bucket System

He realized that our brains constantly throw thoughts at us, both positive and negative, just to see what sticks. His mistake was grabbing onto every negative thought and accepting it as truth. The Bucket System is a disciplined way to manage this internal chaos:

- The Bad Bucket: When a negative thought pops into his head ("You can't save this"), he acknowledges its existence, but

immediately drops it into the Bad Bucket, recognizing it as useless noise. He refuses to let it define him.

- The Good Bucket: He actively fuels this bucket by creating positive, reinforcing self-talk like, "I've put in the work" or, "That last goal went in, but I made four incredible saves earlier." He accepts these positive thoughts as truth, keeping his self-confidence high even when the scoreboard suggests otherwise.

To ensure this resilient mindset is sustainable over a long season, Haitsma relies on a concept learned from an Olympic coach: The Rule of Thirds.

The rule states that when you're chasing a dream or doing anything truly difficult, you're meant to feel good a third of the time, okay a third of the time, and crappy a third of the time. If your ratio is roughly in that range, you're doing fine.

Haitsma uses this to attack the mental pressure of slumps. When he's feeling terrible, he simply reminds himself: "This is just the 'crappy third,' and it's temporary." This perspective is liberating. It removes the stress of needing to feel motivated every day and reinforces the essential difference between winners and losers: Discipline. The winners don't change their approach during their "crappy third"; they still show up and put in the same relentless effort.

To enforce the Goldfish Mentality in the heat of a game, Haitsma uses a simple, tangible "reset button" on his glove (the team's logo). The moment the ball hits the net, he tries to initiate this physical cue as quickly as possible. Pressing the button sends a deliberate, immediate signal to his brain: the last play is over. It keeps him grounded and shifts his focus from unproductive emotion to immediate execution.

After a bad performance, Haitsma uses journaling to gain perspective. His process is strategic and powerful:

1. Two Columns: He creates one column for things that went well and one for things that didn't go well.
2. The Cross-Out: He goes through the "didn't go well" column and physically crosses out everything that was outside of his control (missed slides, bad calls, distracting fans). By doing

this, he clearly demonstrates to his own mind that those items are not worth thinking about.

3. Action Plan: He is left only with the controllable mistakes (e.g., poor effort, low communication), which he then turns into an actionable plan for the next practice.

This analytical approach is the final step in his unwavering commitment to improvement: purging the toxic negativity he can't control, and focusing every ounce of his energy on the competence he can build.

The bucket method



Chapter 3: Andrew Cook: The Action-Oriented Approach

Andrew Cook is the ultimate proof that confidence is not a feeling; it is a direct result of work. His high school lacrosse career at Torrey Pines, California is a testimonial to this concept. As a four year starter and captain, Cook amassed an astonishing 601 saves, including 172 as a senior, cementing his status as one of the best lacrosse goalies to ever be recruited from the West. His tenure was marked by dedication and performance that led to four consecutive CIF championships and earned him two-time USA Lacrosse All-American honors, as well as the USA Lacrosse Western Player of the Year.

Torrey Pines head coach Jono Zissi summarized it perfectly: "Andrew was a tireless worker and a total lacrosse junkie. He worked so hard at his craft and continued to improve over his career through his effort and pure desire. He will leave California as one of the best goalies to ever come out of the West."

Cook's mindset is simple: you cannot lie to yourself about the work you have done, and that truth is the only foundation for confidence. He attacks the mental game by always grounding his mind in the physical proof of his effort and never allowing doubt to creep in.

Visualizing Past Labor

Cook's pre-game routine is unique because he doesn't visualize future glory; he visualizes past preparation. This isn't just a mental game; it's a deep form of psychological self-assurance that guarantees competence.

His ritual is consistent and potent. Before every game, he would sit in his car, drink a yerba mate energy drink, and listen to his pre-game playlist. During this quiet time, he closes his eyes and consciously thinks about his entire career. He doesn't just skim the highlights; he immerses himself in the commitment. He mentally goes all the way back to the moment he first picked up a stick,

thinking about his journey and everything he did, every single hour he invested to get to where he is today.

This visualization is intense. He doesn't just remember the awards; he remembers the painful work. He recalls the countless hours of repetition, the physical feel of the ball hitting his stick over and over, the muscle ache from a thousand drills, the sound of peppering the rebounder until his arms were numb, and the sight of tearing up all the grass in his backyard from relentless footwork drills and ladders. He mentally relives the exhaustion, the sting of missed shots in practice, the unwavering commitment he made to himself when no one was watching. This is the hard evidence he needs.

This is a fascinating and profoundly effective approach. Instead of relying on hope or fleeting positive emotions for success, Cook uses his memory to manufacture confidence in real time. He employs the tangible, painful evidence of his past labor as a rock solid guarantee of his current ability. He knows that he has earned the right to stand in that cage, and by reminding himself of this undeniable fact before he competes, he leaves absolutely no room for doubt in his mind. This ritual consistently puts him in what he describes as the perfect mindset of grounded readiness. The emotional power of this ritual acts as a psychological armor against the immense pressure of game day.

The Power of Mantras

Cook knows that lacrosse is too fast for hesitation, and a lacrosse goalie's mind is prone to immediate destructive self-talk the moment a shooter winds up. He keeps his focus sharp and reliable during play by using simple mantras, which have changed and evolved over his years in the cage. He uses two primary mantras, each serving a critical function in different moments of the game.

His general mantra for focus and staying locked in is the simple three step process: "Set, Still, See."

This is an excellent tool for goalies who get distracted by doubts and wandering thoughts. It forces instant compliance with the fundamentals, cutting off analytical thought before it can take

hold. It is a rapid-fire sequence of commands designed to keep the mind and body synchronized:

- **Set:** Get into your proper stance and be ready. Your mind must be ready before your body is. This is the activation trigger.
- **Still:** Do not move unnecessarily once you are set. Trust your training and your stance. Unnecessary movement allows the shooter to manipulate you.
- **See:** See the ball all the way into your stick. Track it, hunt it, and follow it until the last possible millisecond. Let your instincts take over only once the ball is released.

This simple phrase provides a three step solution to immediately lock your mind back into the game when it begins to drift or when the adrenaline spike threatens to override your control.

Beyond this baseline focus, Cook has a separate routine for when he gets scored on. The best goalies have a plan for a goal, because it is inevitable. It is easy to let emotions take over in the heat of the moment, but a disciplined routine reminds your brain that this is just part of the game. This plan prevents the momentary lapse from becoming a mental collapse.

His mantra for a quick recovery is: "Release, Relax, Refocus."

- **Release:** Let go of the emotions and immediate anger you are feeling. The goal is in the past, and you cannot get it back. You must physically and mentally discard the mistake.
- **Relax:** Calm your body and mind. Take a deep, deliberate breath to physically regain composure and lower your heart rate. Tension in the body kills reaction time.
- **Refocus:** Immediately shift your attention toward the present moment and focus on making the next play for your team. The only thing we can change is the future.

You must constantly remind yourself that you cannot go back in time. The only thing you can do anything about is the next opportunity you get to make a save, a clear, or a play for your team. This deliberate, three step mental process prevents the emotional spiral that costs goalies more saves than any shooter ever could. It is the core of the goldfish mentality, applied with conscious steps.

Positioning

Cook's approach to tracking the ball goes beyond merely seeing the shot; it involves a sophisticated level of tactical positioning and understanding of geometry. He knows that it is extremely important to be aware of how much of the goal you are taking up with your positioning in order to make a calculated decision about what the shooter sees.

He notes that especially on shots with a lower angle, shooters tend to want to shoot high because that is simply where they see the most net. This is a weakness he exploits.

For him, keeping this psychological factor in mind allows him to be patient and wait to see the release of the shot. He would much rather get beat low than high on these lower angle shots. When you take away the low shot with your legs, you force the shooter to try to beat your stick high. If the shooter goes high in this situation, you barely have to move if you don't guess and go early: just a few inches to the left or right with your stick. This is a far more controllable save.

Furthermore, your legs are a powerful, dynamic tool that can be used to shut down low shots, particularly at lower angles, often requiring just a simple, quick twitch adjustment. This is where he places his trust. If you anticipate low, drop your hands early, and the shooter goes high, you have zero chance of keeping that ball out. Cook's approach is about waiting, trusting his positioning, and influencing the shot selection by taking away the shooter's most tempting target and making the high shot the only difficult option.

Adversity as Fuel

Cook's most difficult adversity was not a game or a bad shot, but a challenge to his starting position. During his freshman year, he transferred to Torrey Pines High School, a nationally recognized program in San Diego, California, and he expected to be the four year starter. That turned out not to be true because another, older goalie transferred to the school the same year. Cook's initial reaction was that he wouldn't be able to touch the field until he was a junior. The sense of betrayal and frustration was enormous, and

the challenge was immediately set: he could sit and wait, or he could force the coach's hand through undeniable performance.

He made a powerful change in mindset: he decided to stop thinking about starting at all. He put his head down and got to work. Adversity was not a reason to quit; it was fuel for relentless effort and commitment to self-improvement. He recognized that the only thing he controlled was his own competence.

Cook adopted a routine that proved his dedication. He turned his backyard into a personal training ground: "I would wake up, run a mile, and do my wallball, ladders, jump rope, and stepping drill routine." Then, during the season, he went after the toughest competition possible. He asked the best shooters on the team, including a senior captain and five star recruit going to UNC, to shoot on him consistently. This was purposeful, painful practice against the best talent he could find.

"He would absolutely destroy me," Cook admits. "But once I started to get used to his shot and started saving more of them, it gave me that much more confidence in practice." He knew that if he could hold his own against an elite Division I level shooter every day, he could stop anyone in high school. He forced the transformation of pain into skill.

The opportunity eventually came. One day, the junior goalie had a terrible game, and Cook played the second half well, demonstrating poise and skill built from all those extra reps. This set him up to start the next, much more important game against their rival: St. Ignatius. The night before the big game, he got the text: he was starting. He ended up making almost 20 saves, cementing his place as the starter for the rest of his impressive high school career. The lesson is undeniable: work is the only antidote to doubt.

Confidence and Leadership: No Blame, No Burnout

Cook's experience has given him a strong philosophy on managing slumps and leading his team. He approaches the struggle of getting in a slump with a perspective of acceptance: you are going to get scored on, you are going to lose, and you are going to go through hard moments in your career. It is vital to not overdo it and burn yourself out.

If you are taking extra shots to try to get out of a slump and you find yourself going into a mental downward spiral, simply stop taking shots. That downward spiral is self-sabotage. Do footwork, hit the wall, work on your positioning, or anything else. There is a huge difference between pushing through discomfort and deliberately harming your own mindset. However, the truth is that you cannot let your mind off the hook. When you are fighting a crisis of competence, rest is the same as quitting. You must stay in the arena; just change the source of your discomfort. If taking shots is causing a mental spiral, you do not go home and watch television. You immediately shift to agility drills, solo technique work, or whatever the source of your issue is. The sustained effort confirms you are still committed to the process, even if you hate the feeling. This continuous effort is the best way to eliminate excuses and force self-improvement.

As a leader, he emphasizes the importance of remaining calm no matter what happens, and ensuring his defense stays calm too. "No matter what the circumstance, never blame your defenders. Even if it is completely their fault, it will never help the situation. Calmly address the mistake and make adjustments accordingly, and then onto the next play."

This is essential leadership. When your whole team is watching, your actions matter. You are the backstop, and your composure is the foundation for the defense's confidence. Cook ensures the defensive unit comes together after a goal to quickly address what happened, make adjustments, and always ends the huddle with "next play." This disciplined behavior ensures the team maintains its edge, even when the scoreboard is against them.

Andrew Cook's legacy is defined by action. His confidence is not an inherent trait, but the unavoidable outcome of tireless, strategic work, a process that turned him into one of the most exceptional goalies to ever come out of the West Coast.

Chapter 4: Bryce Cheek: The Free-Minded Goalie

Bryce Cheek, a former teammate of mine at the University of Utah, has a contradictory approach to what we've covered so far, demonstrating that not all athletes operate the same. His career, which includes two state championships at Weddington High School, a spectacular 5.7 career goals allowed average, and years of elite collegiate play, proves that you do not need intricate mental checklists to dominate. For Cheek, elite performance comes from achieving mental freedom.

His success is built on the idea that overthinking is the enemy of instinct, and that the highest level of performance is achieved by avoiding expectations and detaching your self-worth from the outcome of the game. He shows that the commitment to the crease should stop the moment you walk off the field.

Pre-Game: Avoiding the Mental Trap

While many elite lacrosse goalies, like McMinn and Haitsma, rely heavily on intricate visualization routines, Cheek avoids them entirely. This is his defining mental strategy, and it is crucial for goalies who struggle with performance anxiety or the pressure of perfection.

He realized early that if he visualized the game or a scenario too much, the mental images became rigid expectations, setting an impossible standard for game day. When the action on the field started to deviate even slightly from his visualized "perfect game," the cognitive dissonance immediately triggered a mental collapse or a spiral. This technique protects him from the true toxic pressure of the game: the pressure to meet expectations. Every fan expects perfection. Every coach expects a save. By refusing to visualize perfection, Cheek avoids setting that impossible bar for himself internally. His mind is then free to be present and respond to reality, not the crushing weight of what he should be doing according to the crowd.

He found that trying to execute a pre-determined outcome actually hurt his reaction time. The moment he started judging the chaos of the game, he lost his edge. The ball would be in the back of the net before his brain could finish its internal argument.

His sole focus before competing is to cultivate a mind clear of expectations and outcomes. If you are a lacrosse goalie, you understand the simple, brutal truth here: if you think too much, the ball is already in the back of the net. Everything happens suddenly and fast, and there is not enough time to think through every scenario as the game progresses. You must rely on instinct built from thousands of reps, not analysis. If you are a goalie who tends to overthink, always analyzing your footwork or hand positioning, Cheek's simple, blank-slate approach might be the best mental fix for you. You need to turn off the internal coach and let the animal in the cage take over. This shift from analyzing to reacting is the difference between a high-save game and a mental breakdown.

Cheek's preparation is unconventional but deeply intentional. He needs sensory cues that force his mind into a state of immediate, reactive focus, ensuring he is present and free of analytical thought before the first whistle. He needs his senses without the pressure of the game creeping in.

Before competing, he uses juggling, a standard hand-eye drill. But his unique, signature ritual is playing the mobile game Piano Tiles on his phone. He discovered that the app's quick, precise, movements helped him lock in his hand-eye coordination and reaction time without demanding any cognitive energy related to lacrosse. It is a simple tool that works his fast-twitch reflexes without any pressure or attachment to the game's outcome. It is a pure, simple reaction. The speed required by the game forces his mind into a flow state, where analysis is impossible, and only action remains.

He also has a powerful sensory cue in his pre-game routine: listening to the same specific song, "Always on Time" by Ja Rule and Ashanti. This tradition started after a great game in little league, creating a powerful emotional anchor to success. This is a great reminder that your ritual does not need to be traditional or complicated; it just needs to be something that works for you personally. These small, consistent actions give him a necessary

sense of control and a focused mindset that allows him to perform his best without the burden of over-complication. They become a mental sanctuary before the war begins.

Patience and Physical Stance

When it comes to tracking the ball and reading shooters, Cheek, like Haitsma, relies on the visual cues of the shoulders and hips. It is incredibly difficult for any shooter to truly hide their intentions when their body is winding up for a high-velocity shot. These cues provide a necessary half-second warning, but they are only hints, not guarantees.

However, even with these helpful cues, Cheek emphasizes the absolute importance of being patient and actually waiting for the shot to be released. He tries to rely entirely on his instinct and experience first and foremost, because the moment he allows analysis to creep in, the harder it is for him to see the ball and make the save. Overthinking your save mechanics mid-shot is the death of instinct. If you guess, you lose.

He relies on a clear physical cue to ensure his body is always optimized for an explosive reaction. He likes to keep his hips back, as if he is sitting on a barstool. The position is the perfect athletic stance for goaltending. With his hips grounded and loaded, his body coils like a spring. This stance minimizes unnecessary pre-shot movement and allows him to explode directly toward the ball.. He has done all he can physically to prepare himself to make a save, leaving the rest to pure reaction and trusting his muscle memory.

Detaching Worth and the Reconnection Model

Cheek found that his hardest adversity was not facing an opponent, but dealing with the mental load of being a backup goalie early in his college career. The anxiety was immense. He was an elite high school player, a two-time state champion, yet he was constantly tying his sense of worth and value to his title on the team, worrying if he was starting the next game or not. This created an impossible mental standard.

The breakthrough for him was realizing that he needed to detach his sense of worth from his athlete identity. He recognized that constantly linking his personal value to his position was a source of unmanageable anxiety and frustration. His worth as a person cannot be defined by his save percentage. He actively participated in the Beta Club and the Science National Honor Society, which helped reinforce the fact that he is able to provide value outside of the crease. This success was his counterweight.

Once he made this mental shift, he was able to reconnect with the simple joy of the game he fell in love with as a child, and stop constantly worrying about if he was "good enough." This is true mental resilience: finding purpose and joy in the work, regardless of the outcome or the role you are assigned. He learned that the work itself is the value, not the title. By letting go of the need to be the starter, he became the best goalie he could be.

This detachment philosophy is also his go-to strategy for bouncing back from a poor performance. When he has a bad day, he does not double down on anger and extra reps; he actively focuses on what truly matters in his life. He deliberately forces himself to break the cycle of obsession.

"It's all about detaching yourself from your athlete identity," he advises. If you're having a bad day, try calling your loved ones, go out with your friends, or go for a nice walk with your dog. Do the simple, human things that remind you of the rest of your life that you're fortunate and grateful to have. Once you do that, a "bad game" seems small in the grand scheme of things. It forces perspective.

This philosophy is essential for all goalies. Lacrosse is a game that is supposed to be fun. You must take the position seriously, but if you carry the intense frustration and stress of the crease into the rest of your life, you are not only going to be a worse lacrosse player, but you are likely going to be a worse friend, family member, and partner. You must be able to work your tail off, take the position seriously, but always remember to enjoy the game for what it is: a game.

Leadership: Accountability, Not Blame

As a leader, the biggest point Cheek brings up is accountability and the absolute refusal to play the blame game. As a lacrosse goalie, you must not only understand, but accept the role that you play on the team. You are the last person on the team who can prevent the ball from going in.

He suggests that when a goal goes by that was clearly his fault, he should immediately let his defense know in the huddle that the previous goal was on him, and that he will not let it happen again moving forward. This is not dwelling; it is an act of supreme self-accountability that immediately clears the slate and allows the defense to trust him completely. This honesty fosters a culture of collective responsibility. You take the blame to clear the defense's conscience.

Cheek drives home the point that lacrosse is a game designed for many goals. You are not supposed to shut out the other team; you are supposed to get scored on. Lacrosse would not be as fun as it is without all the goals scored. Simply accepting that getting scored on is an inevitable part of the game can help you place significantly less emotional value on the outcome of a save or a goal. It is a mindset that champions relentless effort over the impossible standard of perfection.

Chapter 5: Gordie Smith: The Goal-Setting Mind

Gordie Smith, a sophomore goalie at Lehigh University, brings a mindset forged by elite, multi-sport pressure. A Baltimore native, Smith was a multi-faceted athlete at St. Paul's, where he was a standout lacrosse player, earning All-MIAA and All-State honors. Beyond the crease, he captained the basketball team and was a three-year starter in football, recording the highest field goal percentage and extra point percentage in school history.

Smith's journey proves that ultimate confidence is not an inherent trait, but the unavoidable result of a tactical, strategic process. He learned that performing perfectly when the pressure is highest, whether kicking the game-winning field goal or making the final save, comes from mastering the controllable elements and embracing the very anxiety that crushes other competitors. For Smith, the mental battle is everything, and he has a distinct strategy for winning it.

Embracing the Butterflies and Flow

Smith's first principle is a direct challenge to the common advice about "calmness." He believes that mental preparation is significantly more important than physical preparation for lacrosse goalies. He states simply: "You're not going to fix any bad habits the night before a game, but a change in mindset might completely change the way you play the game."

He takes a tactical approach to managing the physical feelings of stress and anticipation. He doesn't try to fight the nervousness, the butterflies in his stomach, or the weight of the game. He actively embraces the anxious feelings entirely.

He closes his eyes and physically feels the weight of the moment. He believes that the more pressure and nerves you feel, the more ready you are to perform and take care of business for your team. He has conditioned his mind to associate that visceral rush of adrenaline and those butterflies with confidence. This is a powerful, self-conditioned form of visualization where stress is

immediately converted into a signal for peak performance. Instead of trying to suppress his energy, he channels it directly into focus.

The Kicker's Mentality: Pressure is Binary

Gordie Smith's background as a successful football kicker at St. Paul's is perhaps the single greatest source of his mental toughness. Kicking is one of the most mentally difficult positions in sports, sharing a unique, brutal core with the lacrosse goalie: the moment is singular, isolated, and the outcome is binary: score or a miss. There is no partial success, and there is nowhere to hide.

As a kicker, you stand on the sideline for an entire drive, often for an entire quarter, waiting for one moment. When the coach calls your number, you run onto the field with forty seconds to convert a kick that will either win the state championship or send the team home. This demands an absolute mastery of self-control. Smith learned early that you cannot control the wind, the snap, or the hold, but you can control your pre-kick steps, your breathing, and your swing. This is the exact same philosophy he carries into the lacrosse goal: obsessively master the mechanics you can control, and accept the environment you cannot.

In both positions, the goal is to convert crippling anxiety into laser focus. In football, Smith couldn't afford to think about the scoreboard, the opposing rush, or the volume of the crowd. He had to convert the pressure into a simple checklist: step one, step two, plant, swing. The ability to execute a pre-programmed, muscle-memory action under overwhelming stress is the definition of clutch performance.

This perfectly informed his goalie mindset. When facing a high-velocity step-down shot or an alley dodge, the pressure is identical. He uses his football training to convert the "butterflies" (as he calls them) into a signal to execute his process. That could be his breathing pattern, his three-toss stick ritual, or his pre-set goal for the practice. He learned as a kicker that the player who can most reliably override the nervous system with a simple, disciplined process is the one who will succeed.

His experience with kicking also cemented his philosophy of controllable goals. A kicker never aims to "make the field goal,"

because the external variables (wind, bad snap) can always interfere. A great kicker aims to execute the perfect approach and follow-through.

Smith translated this directly to the crease. He does not aim to “make the save” on a certain number of shots. He aims to execute the perfect fundamental movement. If his goal is to stop dropping his hands, he succeeds whether the ball goes in or not, as long as his hands stay up before the shot is released. This powerful strategy, where success is defined by process, not outcome, was honed over years of performing under the Friday night lights. It is the core reason he is able to avoid burnout and consistently build genuine, internal confidence.

Smith is one of the few goalies who uses extreme physical exertion as a way to prepare his mind. He always runs a couple of laps around the field before a game.

He believes that a loose body performs better on autopilot, without the mind overthinking. In other words, he gets his body ready through physical exertion so that the only task left is getting his mindset ready. He has noticed that in practice, his best performances often come after he has run gassers and his body is completely loose, allowing his instincts to take over entirely.

What he is deliberately doing here is using physical exertion to force his brain into a flow state, often described as “being in the zone.” This is a mental state where a person is so completely immersed in an activity that they experience energized focus and a loss of self-consciousness. By loosening his body through physical exertion, Smith moves past the point of conscious, analytical thought and allows his instincts to take over. This autopilot mode is the essence of a flow state. The sensation is often described as watching a play-by-play movie of yourself as opposed to actively controlling your body’s physical movements.

Instinct Over Analysis

Smith stays engaged during the game primarily through communication with his defense. He uses this command role to stay present and grounded. The single most crucial thing he actively looks to avoid during play is analyzing his save mechanics.

He feels that once he starts mentally reviewing his stance or his positioning, he has a very hard time seeing the ball and moving naturally with muscle memory. Overthinking in the cage is the death of instinct. The moment it is safe to do so, Smith finds the nearest defender and talks to him about the last defensive play. This active, outward conversation forces his mind away from self-analysis and back onto the field, eliminating the mental space where doubts can grow.

Smith's approach to seeing the ball is rooted in clear, situation-specific mental cues. He found himself struggling with skip passes, a high-risk shot, and needed a simple, immediate mental fix. He created a specific mantra: "set and see it." This keeps his mind clear and locked in.

Beyond that, he has a protocol for that exact situation: he tells himself he is only going to use his stick for high shots off a skip pass. This prioritizes keeping his stick up, his chest big and square to the shooter, and taking up maximum cage space. He trusts that his body and muscle memory will react appropriately if the shot goes low, but he prioritizes the save he needs to make with his hands. He attacks the shot with as much effort as possible while maintaining his relaxed stance. This is a brilliant example of using an intentional thought to guide instinct.

The Power of Controllable Goals

This idea of tactical control is the core of Smith's entire philosophy for building and maintaining confidence, regardless of his current performance outcomes. He sets small, achievable goals every practice that he is confident he can execute on. This is the bedrock of his long-term success, honed through years of having to deliver consistent, repeatable kicks in high-pressure football games.

He emphasizes that you must avoid setting result-based goals. You cannot control if a shooter scores on you. You can only control your process. Focusing on outcomes only generates anxiety.

Instead, his focus is on goals that he has direct, absolute control over. He advises goalies to find a mechanical weakness, such as

dropping their hands, and set the goal for that day's practice to simply keep their hands up until the release of every single shot.

The psychological power of this is immense. Even if you let in every shot that day, you can still say you achieved your goal. You have satisfied your mental requirement for success. You stack these small, controllable wins on top of each other, and eventually, you find your way out of a slump because you have built genuine competence, brick by brick. If you are struggling with a specific issue, it is often best to mentally isolate it until you are confident and consistent with performing that particular movement at a high level. You are training a single muscle to fire correctly, not trying to fix everything at once.

Smith promotes accountability, but always in a constructive tone. Don't be afraid to call out your defenders when they make a mistake, but it must be done with respect. Yelling, "Bob, what are you doing?!" is ineffective and only breeds resentment. Instead, opt for a problem-solving approach: "Hey Bob, next play, I need you to keep your head on a swivel and look off-ball. Don't get caught ball-watching, okay?" This addresses the problem, suggests a solution, and maintains the integrity of the team. Furthermore, he always makes sure to loudly and confidently praise his defenders when they make great plays. You must build up your teammates just as much as you correct them.

Bouncing Back and Final Perspective

Smith adheres to the Goldfish Mentality (moving on quickly from mistakes) but he allows himself a brief, intentional reflection. He lets himself quickly reflect on what went wrong before switching that attention towards his next opportunity. He uses the mistake as a reminder to employ a simple, forward-looking mental cue like "hands high" or "stay big."

His strategy for bouncing back from a tough game involves two parts:

- **Perspective Break:** Taking a step away from the game for a short period of time to enjoy time with friends, play a video game, or share a meal with family. This detaches the self-worth from the performance.

- Strategic Journaling: After taking time away, and with a fresh mind, he recommends physically writing down what went wrong (only if it was within your control) and what you are going to do to do better during your next game or practice. This creates an actionable plan to move forward.

His final piece of advice is the ultimate summary of his career philosophy, honed from his time at St. Paul's all the way to Lehigh: Embrace the challenge. "It is and always will be a game you're playing with your friends. Embrace the stress and butterflies that come with it because there's going to be nothing like it once you're done playing, but always remember that going through a slump or hard time is one of the blessings of being an athlete. This position teaches you so much about yourself and about life."

Playing lacrosse goalie is a privilege. Smith's lesson is to dive into the challenge and fall in love with all of the adversity that comes with playing such a difficult position.

Journaling for goalies



Chapter 6: Sophia Chan: The Resilient Leader

Sophia Chan is the ultimate proof that an elite lacrosse goalie can be forged anywhere, anytime, with the right level of discipline. Her journey is a testament to the growth of international lacrosse. She plays for the Hong Kong U20 National Team and is based outside of the US in the United Kingdom, proving that the highest level of talent now comes from all over the world.

What makes her story unique is the timing of her start. While most elite goalies have been playing since they were children, Chan picked up the stick and strapped on the pads much later, at the age of 16. She quickly climbed her way up the ranks, a brutal and necessary process that taught her that resilience and focus are muscles you must actively train. She credits her coaches for motivating her and pushing her to those limits. Because she started late, she had to be efficient and strategic with her development, which directly shaped her approach to the mental game.

The Night Before Preparation

For Chan, the mental game begins long before she steps on the turf on game day. Unlike lacrosse goalies who save their visualization for the last few minutes before the whistle, Chan prioritizes her mental preparation the night before. She uses the calm, distraction-free environment of the evening to set the mental stage for the next day, ensuring she is prepared for any situation she will face.

The night before a game, she performs a deep, intentional visualization routine. She will visualize exactly what she wants to do in her head. She visualizes making a certain type of save, directing a challenging clear, or being the vocal leader of her defense. She runs these scenarios again and again in her mind so that when the game day comes, she is already mentally prepared to face those exact situations. The mind is a powerful tool, and Chan uses this technique to train hers to react automatically.

After she finishes the visualization, she begins a specific reflection process. She goes over a mental checklist where she runs through details and specific game situations. She makes sure she remembers what her teammates like to do in the clear, what plays her defense will be running against certain opponents, and what the opponent's top shooters might rely on. This deep focus on strategy and team dynamics the night before allows her to step into the cage the next day without having to think about the tactical side of the game. Her only job then is to stop the ball.

Health is the Secret Weapon

Chan mentions that for her to be at her peak levels of focus, it starts with her basic health. This is an absolutely true and scientifically backed point that far too many goalies overlook. You can have the best visualization routine in the world, but if your body is failing, your mind will fail, too.

She connects mental clarity directly to the bedrock of human performance:

- Sleep
- Diet
- Hydration

These are the fundamentals that must be perfect if you want to perform at an elite level.

First, consider sleep. Studies have shown that a lack of sleep can induce effects similar to having a blood alcohol content of 0.10%, which is well past the legal limit for driving. When you consistently get less than six hours of sleep, your cognitive function is significantly impaired. This directly affects a lacrosse goalie's ability to maintain sustained attention, process visual information, and execute quick, reflexive actions. In a game, this translates to slower reaction times, an inability to anticipate a shooter's movements, and a general decline in your ability to make critical, split-second decisions. You are literally moving slower than you should be, all because you didn't sleep enough.

Next, consider your diet, the fuel for the machine. The food you consume has a profound impact on brain function and energy regulation. A diet high in processed foods and simple sugars leads to unstable energy levels, causing a predictable crash that manifests as "brain fog" and fatigue. In contrast, a diet rich in whole foods, healthy fats, and complex carbohydrates provides a stable supply of glucose, the brain's preferred fuel source. This sustained energy allows you to maintain peak focus, concentration, and mental clarity for all four quarters, helping you avoid the mental dips that lead to costly, momentum-killing mistakes.

Finally, hydration is not just about avoiding thirst; it is a fundamental requirement for optimal brain function. The human brain is composed of 73% water, and even a mild level of dehydration (a 1%-2% loss of body weight due to fluid deficit) has been shown to cause significant cognitive impairments. This includes reduced alertness, delayed reaction times, and an increased sense of fatigue. For a goalie, even being slightly dehydrated can fatally impair your ability to track the ball and communicate effectively with your defense. Staying properly hydrated ensures that oxygen and nutrients are efficiently delivered to your brain cells, allowing them to fire on all cylinders when you need them most.

Chan's lesson here is simple: your ability to concentrate during a game is built long before you step on the field. Focus is not a switch you flip; it is a state you create through consistent, disciplined habits.

Chan understands that having excellent in-game focus is not a mysterious gift; it starts with your training. Focus is a muscle you must exercise to improve it, and the only way to train this muscle is while you are actively training your body. You will not magically be able to focus during your games if you have never worked this muscle before.

Her routines are built around intentional sensory triggers and purposeful drills.

She uses a pre-game playlist that, much like a form of Pavlov's conditioning, always gets her in the zone. The Russian scientist Ivan Pavlov famously showed that he could train dogs to associate the sound of a bell with food. For Chan, by consistently listening to the same music right before practices and games, her mind has

learned to associate that specific playlist with the feeling of being focused and ready to play. The music acts as a powerful signal, a mental shortcut that helps her tap into her peak performance state quickly and reliably.

She pairs this with specific physical drills to reinforce her readiness. She does a number of hand-eye drills like juggling to prime her reaction time and a ball toss with her coach to each corner of the goal, focusing intently on tracking the ball all the way into her hands. This highlights the importance of not just performing drills, but practicing with a specific purpose in mind. By mentally and physically rehearsing these moments, she reinforces her readiness and prepares her body for the game's demands.

When the game starts, Chan's approach to tracking the ball and making the save is simple and direct. She doesn't have a complicated strategy outside of relaxing and just finding the ball.

She focuses all of her attention on finding the ball and reacting to it, patiently waiting for the shot to be released from the shooter's stick head. Her belief is that the most direct path to a save is achieved by eliminating mental clutter. She trusts that the immense hours of practice and the strategic preparation done the night before will handle the mechanics and the tactics. Her only job in that moment is pure, uninhibited reaction to the shot.

Using Communication as Clarity

Like nearly every elite lacrosse goalie, Chan utilizes communication with her team as a primary strategy to stay engaged. However, her perspective on why communication is vital offers a crucial insight.

She used to feel overwhelmed about keeping her defense organized while also having to keep the ball out of the goal. Over time, with experience and mentorship from her coaches, she came to a powerful realization: communicating with and keeping your defense organized actually helps you make more saves.

It is a triple advantage:

- **Shots You Want to See:** Organizing your defense helps guide the opposition toward taking only the shots you are most comfortable saving.
- **Focus:** It keeps your mind present and focused on only stopping the other team from scoring.
- **Less Volume:** It decreases the overall number of shots you have to see, which means you and your team give up less goals overall.

Communicating does not distract you from saving the ball; it enhances your primary objective by preventing chaos and creating clarity. Her lesson is that your voice is your most powerful tool for defending the entire crease, not just your body.

Chan's mental resilience was put to its toughest test when she faced her biggest obstacle: a severe injury setback right before the U20 World Championship in 2024 during training camp. She had sustained injuries to her wrist and adductor. Because of these injuries, she naturally struggled to perform at a high level in camp and immediately felt the crushing weight that she was letting her whole team down. The pressure of representing your country on the global stage makes this kind of failure feel catastrophic.

Ultimately, the support from her teammates and coaches is what allowed her to eventually pick herself back up and regain her confidence. She especially credits her goalie coach, Mel, who helped her create a concrete plan to regain her mental edge. Mel also encouraged her to make a highlight tape of herself to help her regain confidence, which she found tremendously helpful. Watching herself make awesome saves gave her the confidence she needed to get back in the cage and not just think, but know that she was capable of performing at an elite level. This experience highlights a key lesson for every lacrosse goalie: the position is mentally demanding, and it is okay to rant and discuss this with your team. You do not have to try to manage all these difficult thoughts and emotions on your own; hash it out with someone you trust. Seeking support is not a weakness; it is a tactical decision to keep your mind whole.

Chan's approach to the Goldfish Mentality is focused on compartmentalization. She actively forces her mind to focus entirely on

what is to come, rather than dwelling on the past. She understands that dwelling on a mistake causes a loss of focus, which leads to making even more mistakes. It is better for her to not think about them at all during the game. She waits until after the game to allow herself to process the mistake and what she can do better going forward.

This leads directly to her post-game journaling ritual. She continues the recurring suggestion of making journaling a habit, but her approach is highly targeted: she writes down just two specific things she can work on in her next training session. This keeps the post-game analysis brief, constructive, and action-oriented.

She also makes the suggestion to talk directly with your teammates and coaches for their external perspective. This can be helpful because sometimes, someone else can pick up on something that you do not notice you are doing wrong. For example, if you ask a midfielder why you keep getting scored on off a pipe-to-pipe pass, they might notice that you are slightly out of position and giving up the near side post. It is a small detail you could easily overlook, but a third-person perspective can immediately point out the fatal flaw. With that small piece of information, you substantially increase your odds of making that next save.

Chan's final piece of mental advice is direct and powerful: you must understand that you cannot save every shot, but you must not let this reality define you or chip away at your confidence. You must learn to differentiate between two scenarios: did you not give all of your effort to stop the shot, or do you simply not have the skill level or experience yet?

If it is the first option, that failure of effort is on you, and you need to fix your discipline. If it is the second option, it means you have an opportunity to improve and get better. That is not a failure; it is a clear path forward. You need to find teammates who will help you practice the specific shots and scenarios you struggle with until you are fully confident in your ability.

Most critically, she states that you need to manufacture your own confidence to actually become confident on the field. When you step into that cage, you need to tell yourself that you belong there, and all the work you have put in has blessed you with this opportunity. If you repeat these types of phrases to yourself

enough, eventually, you will actually believe it, and experience it. From there, you will be genuinely confident in your ability to perform. Confidence is not found; it is created by a commitment to self-belief.

Chapter 7: Zoe Froimovitz: Composure Under Pressure

Zoe Froimovitz, the starting goalie for St. Lawrence University, is the ultimate proof that you can be an elite athlete and still be your own worst critic. Her entire journey has been a lesson in managing the impossible standards lacrosse goalies set for themselves, ultimately discovering that composure comes from understanding what you cannot control.

The War Against Comparison

Froimovitz's biggest mental challenge was not facing a tough shooter; it was dealing with the corrosive pressure of college recruiting. The process took a massive toll on her mentally. She would constantly compare herself with other goalies, a habit that is toxic and destructive, yet common in competitive athletes.

The self-doubt didn't end once she secured the bag. Even after getting to college and earning the starting job her freshman year, she still dealt with these nagging problems with self-doubt and self-belief. This experience taught her a fundamental truth: external validation does not solve internal doubt. You have to develop a deliberate strategy to fight the demons in your own head.

What Froimovitz found most helpful for overcoming these negative feelings and the constant battle of comparison is the realization that there are an infinite number of variables and factors that go into a lacrosse goalie's performance, and a lot of them are completely outside of your control. This could be the sun blinding your eyes, the fans talking to you, or playing on a grass versus a turf field. This realization was a game-changer for her.

She started actively framing her performance and others' success from an external, critical perspective, rather than an internal, guilt-ridden one. For instance, since she struggled with comparing herself with other goalies, she would ask herself: "How is their defense playing? Are they facing high quality shots? Is the offense just shooting right at them?"

This perspective model helped shift her perspective. At the end of the day, you have no control over how well the other goalie plays, nor the factors that play into that. It is best to focus your mental energy on your own performance and control the few things that you can actually make an impact on: your effort, your focus, and your preparation. This mental shift stops the destructive comparison game in your mind.

Simplicity and Intention

Froimovitz understands that simplicity is key to a consistent mental game. She and her coaches realized that overcomplicating the thought process around the position is the number one cause of anxiety. Having simple, reliable mental cues and routines that you can execute easily, regardless of the circumstance, is your best bet for consistent play.

Like Sophia Chan, Froimovitz's preparation starts the night before the game with a deliberate visualization routine. She follows a similar approach to Chan where she visualizes what she wants to do on game day. This is an active mental rehearsal. It could be a specific, challenging situation in the game, like stopping a quick stick on the crease, or executing a perfect clear off a tough save.

When the mental chatter is especially loud and stressful, she uses a technique to clear the mental slate: she will physically write down her negative thoughts. This simple act symbolizes taking the negative thoughts that are racing in her mind, removing them, and putting them onto a physical piece of paper, freeing her from them entirely. It is a tangible way to process and contain the anxiety.

The day of the game, her routine is focused on embodying a desired mental state. She writes down simple words or phrases of characteristics she wants to embody during the game. She provided examples like "calm" and "stay big."

This is a great example of keeping things simple. When the pressure hits, she does not rely on a complex paragraph of instruction; she relies on these simple, reliable cues that immediately recenter her mind. This ensures she maintains a consistent approach and, therefore, more consistent play.

Froimovitz notes that while consistency is important, she tries not to stress too much about her routine because that will throw her off. She understands that not every pre-game situation is the same and being flexible is key. As lacrosse goalies, we can get obsessed with our approach and routine. While it is absolutely important to have a routine, you need to be prepared to save the ball during the game, regardless of what happened the night or hour before faceoff. The routine serves you; you do not serve the routine.

Froimovitz leans heavily on her pre-game routine and visualization habits, trying to keep those same characteristics alive as the game goes on. She constantly visualizes making saves, her team winning, or anything else that keeps her energy up and attitude positive. She is a firm believer that positive energy translates directly to focus and saves.

During particularly long breaks in between offense and defense, she will talk about the last few plays with her defenders to help her stay locked in. This constant communication is a proactive strategy to avoid the mental drift that crushes other goalies. She is too busy commanding and communicating to worry about herself.

The Goldfish Mentality

When adversity inevitably strikes, Froimovitz uses a personalized, external cue to enforce the Goldfish Mentality, the ability to move on instantly. She uses a reset button much like Haitsma's, but hers is rooted in external inspiration.

Before games, she writes the number "31" on her wrist. This number is a tribute to New York Rangers goaltender Igor Shesterkin, a phenomenal hockey goaltender.

Froimovitz explains the significance perfectly: "Resetting by just seeing 31 on my wrist helps, but also understanding that the best lacrosse goalies in the world let up bad goals and goals in high-stakes situations. Having this mindset helps take the pressure off of feeling like you have to save every shot."

She uses an external perspective: the fact that professional lacrosse goalies let in goals, to manage her internal state. She

realizes that if the best goalies in the world cannot achieve perfection, she does not need to put that impossible burden on herself. Tapping that number is a physical reminder that the mistake is not a reflection of her worth; it is simply a part of the game.

When the ball comes into the crease, Froimovitz also favors a simple approach of just finding the ball and reacting to it, refusing to overanalyze the situation. She trusts her body to execute the fundamental movements she has trained countless times.

However, she emphasizes that in practice, it can be very helpful to notice the patterns certain teammates follow so that your eyes can naturally read the situation in a game. For example, she says: "If you have a teammate who you know only shoots off-stick, try and notice their positioning so you can easily read those shots in a game."

This concept is a happy middle ground between reading the shooter during their shot and relying purely on instinct. You practice the exact kind of shot you want to be ready to react to during a game, and then when that shot comes, your brain is prepared for it. You are not guessing or anticipating; you are executing a move you have already practiced against thousands of times.

Froimovitz's biggest hurdle as a leader came during her freshman season. Her starting defense were all upperclassmen, creating a power dynamic between her and her defense that was very difficult to manage at times. It is hard enough to be a confident freshman, let alone trying to bark orders at seniors.

However, as the season went on and she became increasingly more comfortable with her role as the starting goalie, she also became more confident with speaking up to her defenders. She realized that for her team to succeed, she had to speak up when something went wrong, even if she was not comfortable with doing so at times. By not speaking up, she was actually hurting her teammates, not helping them. She began to embrace the idea that her voice was a necessity for the team's success, which is the ultimate justification for a lacrosse goalie's command.

Froimovitz's experience taught her a profound truth about the lacrosse goalie's mind: however bad you think you played, there is a very good chance that you are being overly critical of your-

self. She mentioned that she had what she thought to be one of her worst college games during her freshman year, but after the final whistle, her teammates were congratulating her and telling her how great she played.

This paradox happens all the time and is why statistics can be so misleading. We are often our own worst critics. Froimovitz realized the external perspective often valued impact over sheer volume.

Firstly, the when of a save matters a lot. If you have nineteen saves but let in three goals in the final quarter to lose the game, people are going to have a negative view of your performance. Especially if those three goals were relatively easy saves that you would normally make. However, let's say you let in twelve goals but only made four saves. If those four saves were in overtime, they were unbelievably acrobatic, and they led your team to victory, you are a hero! The best goalies in the world perform and show up when it matters most, and that is what people remember.

After a poor performance, Froimovitz's strategy starts with a simple audit: she asks herself about the possible reasons why the game did not go well. Did you sleep well? Did you eat well? Did you follow your normal pre-game routine?

This is a critical step because it immediately focuses the blame on process, not on personality. It helps her understand that sometimes, you can do everything right and still have a bad game. This is normal, and it happens to every lacrosse goalie in the world.

Once she has identified the issue, or confirmed it was simply an unavoidable bad game, she then turns to journaling. Her process is simplified and highly effective: she simply writes her negative thoughts down. For her, this process symbolizes taking the racing negative thoughts in her mind, removing them, and putting them on a physical piece of paper, freeing her from these thoughts entirely. This helps her rationalize the issue and allows her to put it in the past and move on without the thoughts clinging to her confidence.

Froimovitz's final piece of mental advice is simple, memorable, and rooted in her reset ritual: the Goldfish Mindset.

She uses this approach as best as she can to stay present and steady during her games. When you let in a bad goal, you must

be a goldfish. You forget about it entirely and move on to the next opportunity. This, of course, is much easier said than done, but with time and practice, you can improve this skill.

This idea can easily be converted into a simple mantra like "goldfish" or a cue that your coach can yell, like, "Zoe, be a goldfish!" The goalie will immediately know what the coach is trying to say, it avoids humiliation, and it gives the goalie a clear, immediate command to reset and focus on making the next stop.

Zoe Froimovitz's journey is a powerful testament to the fact that you do not need to be an emotionless machine to be an elite lacrosse goalie. You need perspective, self-compassion, and the discipline to use physical cues and external insights to manage the pressure of the position. Her composure is built on the acceptance that perfection is impossible, but resilience is mandatory.

Goldfish Mindset



Chapter 8: Connor Hollison: The Present-Moment

My own journey in the cage, spanning my time as a Division I goalie at the University of Utah (2019-2024) and my several years coaching the position, taught me a brutal truth: the ultimate form of mental mastery is achieving a completely blank mind. My entire philosophy is dedicated to forcing the mind to be entirely present, rejecting the past, ignoring the future, and focusing only on the lacrosse ball. When I play best, my mind is empty of all thoughts except one simple objective: stop the ball.

The Foundations of Preparation

My approach begins long before game time. I believe that being mentally prepared starts the day before. Getting hydrated, proper nutrition, and good sleep are my absolute priorities. I like to have a good breakfast full of protein, preferably three or so hours before game time. Your focus during the game is directly linked to the fuel you put in your body.

In the locker room before the game, I like to stay to myself. I use that time to deliberately lock in and get my brain ready to go.

My pre-game ritual involves combining physical effort with mental visualization. I perform simple hand-eye drills like juggling. I also do wall ball to simulate making saves. I practice visualization, but for me, I need to connect that physical sensation of the wall ball session to the saves I want to make in the game.

I need the physical sensation of making the saves and going through the motions in order to properly visualize what I want to do. So on the wall, I will pretend certain situations are occurring: let's say an alley dodge to a shot on the run. I walk along my arc as if I am in the goal, get set, and then I will take a shot off the wall and make the save with game-like intensity. The combination of physical and mental repetition ensures that when I step into the cage, I am not just reacting. I am responding with movements my body and mind already know perfectly.

BALL, BALL, BALL

My most effective tool for maintaining focus came from a moment of sheer frustration during my junior year of college. I started having a serious issue with my mental game where negative self-talk would creep in as shooters were winding up out of a dodge. My mind would sometimes start wandering and saying very negative things like “you can’t save this shot” or “you’re not good enough.”

After a few months of this issue, I decided something had to change. One practice, frustrated with my negative thoughts, I instinctively started yelling “BALL, BALL, BALL” out loud because I was so angry that my mind couldn’t focus. I discovered that this simple, almost humorous, act actually worked. My mind was unable to focus on anything other than the ball. I just had to force that reality into existence. I made the save easily and immediately realized what I had discovered. From then on, when those negative thoughts occasionally plagued my mind, I would use this outward technique with a lot of success.

This technique is an outstanding way to achieve present-moment focus. It actively engages your mind in thinking about just finding the ball and keeping it out of the goal, leaving no mental capacity for doubts, the scoreboard, or who is shooting the ball. I play best when my mind is empty and focused on one thing: the lacrosse ball.

One point I cannot stress enough is that what works for me may or any of the other goalies in this book may not work for you. Use this book as a guideline, not as a list of commandments. Be creative and take what you want from this information. Be open, but also know yourself.

Overcoming Adversity

The biggest mental challenge I faced as a lacrosse goalie came during my NCAA career. I had spent years grinding, fighting for every rep, and waiting for my chance to prove I belonged at the Division I level. I finally got the opportunity to play in the fourth quarter of a game against Loyola. It was a game we were alre-

ady going to lose, but for me, it was a moment I had waited for: a chance to prove myself.

In just a few short minutes on the field, I let in seven goals and made zero saves.

My worst nightmare had come to life, and that performance absolutely crushed me. Nobody said anything to me after that game because there was nothing to say. I didn't say anything for the rest of the day either. The reality of that failure, played out on the field for everyone to see, was immense. I didn't get another chance to play for two years. The mental toll was immediate and destructive, and quitting seemed like a real and logical option. I thought about walking away many times after that performance, but I made a different choice: I chose to show up every day despite how awful I felt.

I chose to stay committed to the process, even when it felt like there was absolutely no point, and focused on being the best teammate I could be. I am thankful I did not quit, because I would have missed out on so many amazing opportunities to grow and learn, as well as the chance to eventually get back in the cage.

The lesson I took away from this experience is the ultimate key to resilience: your value as a goalie is not defined by one moment, one game, or even a single season. It is defined by your willingness to show up, do the work, and never quit, especially when adversity is at its peak. The adversity you face is what truly strengthens your mental resilience, and your response to it is what matters most.

This experience fundamentally shaped my view on competence. When you lose confidence, the only way to regain it is to increase your competence. This requires strategic practice, not just mindless reps.

Beyond just reps, you have to take some time to think deeply about what you really struggle with. Once you have identified those weak points, that is what you should be aggressively working on. Too many goalies try to overcome their slumps by getting shot on over and over again with step-downs, instead of addressing specific mechanical or mental problems.

For example, if you are really struggling with anticipating shots and you are moving too early, then you should work on that specific aspect of your game. You can have a teammate line up with tennis balls and mix in some fakes and hesitations with the shots, trying to get you to bite early. Ten to fifteen minutes of focused reps like this that actually target the issue you are dealing with will be so much more beneficial than just having someone rip shots at you while you remain frustrated in practice.

The rule is simple: if you are in a slump, you need to practice, but you must practice strategically and deliberately. Specifically target your weak points by deeply thinking about what it is you are exactly struggling with, then create a specific plan to attack those weak points instead of aimlessly repping out shots.

Leading by Example

My philosophy on commanding the crease is built on one principle: your defense must like you, but respect you.

I do not like to rule with fear; I prefer to work as a unit with my defense. When something goes wrong, I do my absolute best to not blame or point fingers. With my teammates, I find the solution, solve the problem through calm conversation, and then move on to the next play as quickly as possible.

I have seen other goalies try to rule with an iron fist. While this approach is appropriate in short bursts to inject fire, it becomes painfully ineffective if overdone. You end up with teammates that simply do not like playing for you. If your teammates do not like playing for you, they are not going to perform at their highest level.

This is a critical distinction for a goalie: while being stern, assertive, and confident in your speech is important, there is a distinct line that you must be careful not to cross. Be honest and direct with your teammates, but be respectful and constructive as well. Your goal is to lift their performance, not tear down their confidence.

My own answer to moving on quickly from bad mistakes goes back to the Goldfish Mentality. For me, I like to focus on being

entirely present as opposed to looking back at the past or looking forward to the future.

I play best when my mind is completely blank and empty of thought. I do everything in my power to keep my mind entirely focused on one single thing: the lacrosse ball. When I start thinking about things like who is shooting the ball, what the score is, or how many saves I have made, I start playing worse and losing my focus.

For me, it is about being entirely present in the moment, and I do this by actively engaging my mind in thinking about just finding the ball and keeping it out of the goal. The simple mantra of "BALL, BALL, BALL" works because it occupies every inch of mental space, leaving no room for the paralyzing fear of consequence.

My final piece of mental advice, drawn from my experience at every level of the game, is simple: do not worry about what other people are doing, and focus entirely on what you can do to be the best athlete possible.

During practice at any level, from middle school up to Division I, you will see athletes cutting corners. They jog during drills where they are supposed to sprint, they go eighty percent when they should be going one hundred percent, and they do the bare minimum to blend in with the pack and not stand out as a problem to the coaching staff.

My advice is to ignore those who choose that path and to create your own. Go one hundred percent all out for a ground ball in a simple drill. Touch the line every single time when your team is doing sprints. Get extra reps before and after practice.

Understand that most people do not do these things, and that is okay. But if you are serious about being an elite level lacrosse goalie, and if you want to squeeze as much juice out of this short experience in your life as possible, do not settle for less than your absolute best. Finish your career knowing that you gave your absolute best effort everyday, and this skill and this memory will be one you can carry with you for the rest of your life.

Be the leader
YOUR TEAM NEEDS



Chapter 9: The Lacrosse Goalie's Creed

The Acceptance of Chaos

We have analyzed the careers of eight elite goalies; from the disciplined routine of McMinn to the mental freedom of Cheek and the strategic work of Cook. Now, as the book nears its conclusion, it is time to synthesize their individual journeys into a single, cohesive philosophy: The Lacrosse Goalie's Creed.

The first tenet of this creed is the hardest to swallow: Accept the Chaos.

The lacrosse goalie is not praised for perfection; you are praised for performance in a fundamentally broken system. You have to willingly accept the absurdity of your role: the isolation, the pain, the absolute consequence of failure. This position is designed to wear you down, to break your composure, and to crush your confidence repeatedly.

The great goalies do not try to fight the chaos. They accept that they are going to get scored on. They accept that they will have terrible games. They accept that the path to success is not a straight line, but a process where you are meant to feel good a third of the time, okay a third of the time, and crappy a third of the time. This is the lesson of Haitsma's Rule of Thirds, which frees you from the burden of needing to feel motivated or perfect every single day.

You must stop blaming outside factors, including the defense, the uneven bounce of the grass, the weather, and the refs. That blame game is the fastest way to lose the battle between your ears. Instead, embrace the chaos, and use the energy you save from not fighting it to focus on the one small list of things you can actually control. The only thing that matters is your process, and your response to adversity.

Discipline is the Only Bridge

If accepting chaos is the first step, then discipline is the only bridge that connects that acceptance to peak performance. You must stop waiting for motivation to strike. Motivation is a passenger; discipline is the driver.

McMinn, Froimovitz, and Haitsma all showed that relentless consistency is the trigger. Your pre-game preparation should not be some complicated, superstitious ritual that causes anxiety if you miss a step. It should be a simple process that tells your mind, "It is time to compete." Use music, visualization, or a specific cup of coffee to cue your focus. The routine serves you, not the other way around.

The discipline must extend to the most mundane aspects of your life. Chan's success proved it: your ability to concentrate during the fourth quarter is determined by the sleep you got, the food you ate, and the water you drank over the last forty-eight hours. You cannot expect a championship performance from a brain that is running on low fuel. Mastering the basics of human health is the baseline for elite mental performance.

But discipline is most necessary when you are struggling. When the shots stop falling your way, every instinct tells you to shoot yourself out of the slump. You want to take endless step-downs, hoping to brute-force your way back to confidence. This is often-times destructive. As Cook and I found, you have to use strategic practice. You must isolate the problem. If you are dropping your hands, your goal for practice is simple: keep your hands up. If you are moving early, your goal is to be perfectly still. You define success by process, not outcome. You stack those small, controllable wins, just like Smith, and that competence becomes the genuine foundation for your confidence. You work strategically until the slump is a memory.

The Power of the Reset Tool

Discipline is also what allows you to employ the single most valuable tool in this entire book: The Reset Tool. This is the key to mastering the Goldfish Mentality.

The goal is to move on instantly. But moving on is not automatic. It requires a deliberate, conscious action to break the cycle of negativity before it takes root. You must find your own personal reset button. For Haitsma, it was a physical cue on his glove. For Froimovitz, it was tapping the number thirty-one on her wrist, reminding her that even the best pros let in goals. For McMinn, it was throwing the ball up three times.

This physical, immediate action is the hard reset. It is the moment you draw a line in the sand and refuse to let the past error pollute the present play. Every single elite goalie in this book has a version of this tool because the pressure is too high to rely on just hope. You need a system. Your focus immediately transitions from what went wrong to the simple, future-oriented question that Smith uses: "What do I need to do on the next shot to make a save?" This process eliminates mental space for guilt and focuses all available energy on the next opportunity. Discipline is the choice to execute that reset, every single time.

Leadership Through Self-Accountability

As the goalie, you are the backbone of the defense, and your communication is your most powerful weapon. But true leadership starts with self-accountability. You cannot be a victim. The moment you start blaming factors outside your control (your defense, a bad bounce, or the crowd) you have already lost the battle between your ears. It is okay to make mistakes; it is not okay to shift the blame.

Cheek's philosophy is the guide here: you must be honest with your defense. If you let in a goal that you absolutely should have saved, you need to be willing to acknowledge it calmly in the huddle: "That one was on me. I lost my positioning. Next play." This is not destructive; it is an act of supreme confidence that immediately clears the slate and allows your defense to trust your command completely.

As a leader, you must balance this self-honesty with constructive communication. Like Smith, you should never criticize your defenders without providing an immediate solution and an abundance of praise. Your voice should be the loudest on the field, used to

direct rotations, call out slides, and build confidence. You must be stern and assertive, but always respectful. Your job is to make your defense better, which directly leads to you making more saves.

The Perspective Shift: Value is in Effort

The final, most enduring lesson from all eight goalies is that your value is in your effort, not your outcome.

Froimovitz struggled with comparing herself to other goalies. Cook worried about being benched. I was crushed by the Loyola setback. All of us had to learn the hard way that external validation (the win, the award, the starting job) is a temporary measure.

Your worth as a person and as an athlete is defined by your willingness to show up every day and give maximum effort, especially when things are going badly. The goalie who uses a terrible game as fuel to train strategically, instead of quitting, is the one who ultimately wins the mental war.

This is the ultimate perspective shift:

- The Past is Done: Use your reset tool, journal your mistakes to learn from them, and refuse to dwell on what cannot be changed.
- The Present is Control: Focus on the singular action in front of you: the ball, the communication, the breath.
- The Future is Effort: Understand that the adversity you face is a blessing. It is an opportunity to strengthen your mental toughness.

When you finish your career, you must be able to look back and know that you did not settle for less than your absolute best effort, every single day. That is the true success of the lacrosse goalie, and that is the core of The Lacrosse Goalie's Creed.

The Lacrosse Goalie's Toolkit:

After absorbing the hard-won wisdom from eight elite lacrosse goalies, it is time to build your own toolkit. These exercises are the fundamental routines that turn theory into action, ensuring you are prepared, focused, and resilient when the pressure hits.

Exercise 1: Crafting Your Pregame Mental Prep Routine (The Consistent Trigger)

Your routine must be intentional. It should be a simple, repeatable process that acts as a trigger, flipping the switch in your mind from casual to competitive, just as McMinn and Haitsma demonstrated. The goal here is not to copy anyone, but to build a framework that works for your personality.

Step 1: Reflect and Identify Your Principles: Take a notebook and reflect on your current state and needs. Honesty is non-negotiable here.

- What makes you feel most confident before a game? Is it feeling prepared, calm, or intensely focused?
- What are your biggest mental challenges before a game? Do you tend to overthink, get anxious, or suffer from negative thoughts?
- Which specific techniques from this book seem most realistic for you to implement right away (breathing exercises, listening to a specific playlist, simple visualization)?

Step 2: Build Your Routine Sequence: Using your answers, create a simple sequence you can execute regardless of travel, time constraints, or venue. A successful routine is one you can stick to consistently.

- **The Night Before:** What is one specific, focused thing you can do the night before a game to prepare? (e.g., visualize one key, successful play, write down a single focused thought, or physically organize all your gear to eliminate morning stress).

- On Game Day (Before the field): What is something you can do to get in the right headspace? (e.g., listen to a specific, short playlist, or use a simple mantra like Cook's "Set, Still, See").
- On the Field (Final Lock-in): What is the one simple action you will take to lock in right before the game starts? (e.g., a hand-eye drill like juggling, a final burst of visualization, or a quick, positive chat with your defense).

Step 3: Acknowledge and Adjust: Your first draft is just that: a first draft. Try it out for a few games and practices. Pay close attention to how you feel. If the routine causes additional stress or fails to make you feel confident, you must be willing to adjust and refine it over time. Your mental game, just like your physical game, is constantly evolving.

Exercise 2: The Goldfish Mentality Challenge (The Reset Tool)

This exercise is designed to train your ability to instantly move past mistakes, staying present and mentally resilient no matter what happens in the game. This is the bedrock of an elite mindset.

Step 1: Choose Your Reset Tool: Based on the different strategies used by goalies like McMinn, Haitsma, and Froimovitz, pick one physical or mental tool that you will use as your Reset Button after every mistake or goal.

- The Physical Reset: Choose a simple, physical action that signals to your brain that the last play is over. This could be a ritualistic action (e.g., throwing the ball up three times like McMinn), a specific physical cue (e.g., tapping a spot on your glove), or a single, deep four-count breath.
- The Verbal Reset: Choose a simple, forward-looking phrase or mantra. This could be something like "hands high," "stay big," or "next play."

Step 2: Put It to the Test Immediately: During your next practice or warm-up, consciously and intentionally use the tool you selected in Step 1 every single time a goal is scored or you make a mistake. The key is to initiate your physical or verbal reset tool as quickly as possible to prevent negative thoughts from taking hold.

Step 3: Redirect Your Focus: immediately after you have completed your reset, redirect your focus to the present moment. Find the ball, talk to your defense, or focus on a simple mantra to empty your mind of past thoughts. Your ability to control your response to adversity is a skill that can be trained and refined over time.

Exercise 3: The Slump-Buster and Competence Kickstart

When you feel like nothing is going right, it is not a time to give up. It is a time to get tactical. This exercise provides a concrete, two part plan to attack your slump head on and regain confidence by building competence, the only true antidote to doubt.

Step 1: The Self-Diagnosis: Before you can fix the problem, you have to be brutally honest about what the problem is. Take a moment to think deeply about your current slump. You must identify the root cause.

- **Mental Slump:** Are you in a downward spiral of negative thoughts? Are you overthinking every decision, letting the score dictate your confidence, or worrying about past mistakes?
- **Physical Slump:** Are you consistently missing saves you normally make? Do your mechanics feel off? Are you moving too early, dropping your hands, or failing to step to the ball?
- **Isolate the Issue:** What is the singular thing you are truly struggling with right now? You must boil it down to one or two controllable flaws (e.g., dropping your hands, moving too early, panic in the clear).

Step 2: Part A - The Mental Reframe: You must address the psychology of the slump first. Choose one mental tool to break the cycle of negativity.

- **The Rule of Thirds (Haitsma):** When you are having a bad day, remind yourself that this is just the "crappy third" and it is temporary. This accepts the struggle and helps you get your emotions in check to focus on the next necessary step.
- **The Detachment Method (Cheek):** Detach yourself from your athlete identity entirely. Go hang out with your friends, call your

family, or go for a walk. Remind yourself that lacrosse is just a game, and having a bad game does not define your worth.

- The Visualization Approach (McMinn/Chan): Find a quiet place and spend ten minutes visualizing a perfect game. Play a mental highlight reel of yourself making amazing saves and dominating the game. You are forcing your brain to remember what competence feels like.

Step 3: Part B - The Competence Kickstart (Gordie's Method): This is the action plan. Based on your isolated weakness from Step 1, choose one small, controllable goal for your next practice. This is the core of Gordie Smith's philosophy: success is defined by process, not outcome.

- Goal Setting: If you identified moving too early, your singular goal is to not move early on a single shot. If you identified dropping your hands, your singular goal is to keep your hands up until the release of every shot.
- The Result is Irrelevant: Even if you let in every single shot, you can still say you succeeded because you achieved your goal of maintaining your mechanics. This creates a psychological victory and builds confidence. You stack these small wins on top of each other until the slump is broken.

Step 4: Intentional Practice: Do not just get shot on over and over again with step downs, hoping things will change. You must practice strategically.

- Target the Weakness: Use a drill that is designed to help you with your specific isolated issue (don't just get shot on randomly). If you struggle with patience on fakes, have a teammate mix in fakes with their step down's and try to catch you moving early. If you struggle with seeing the ball on a certain skip pass, practice only that specific angle and movement. Ten minutes of this focused work is more valuable than an hour of mindless reps.
- Seek Competition (Cook's Method): As your competence returns, seek out your team's best shooters. If you can get comfortable making saves against them, you can save anyone's shot. This will turbocharge your confidence.

Exercise 4: The Adversity Challenge (Response Strategy)

Adversity comes in many forms: a tough loss, a bad game, being a backup, or dealing with an injury. This exercise helps you build a concrete, forward-looking plan for handling these moments using the perspective gained from the best goalies.

Step 1: Identify Your Adversity: Think about a specific adversity you have faced as a lacrosse goalie. Be honest about the situation, your immediate mental response (negative self-talk, frustration), and how that adversity affected your mindset moving forward.

Step 2: Choose Your Response Strategy: Select one high-level strategy that resonates most with you. This is the mental stance you will adopt to attack the problem.

- **The Action Model (Cook):** Adversity is a signal to work harder. You will put your head down, seek out the toughest competition, and let your tireless work build your competence and confidence.
- **The Responsibility Model (McMinn):** Adversity is a team failure, not an individual one. You are not the only reason you lost, and you are not the only reason you won. You will not carry the entire weight alone.
- **The Perspective Model (Froimovitz):** Adversity is just one variable. You will not compare yourself to other goalies, and you will focus entirely on the few things you can control: your effort and your process.
- **The Support Model (Chan):** Adversity is a shared burden. You will lean on your teammates and coaches to hash out the tough moment and create a clear plan.

Step 3: Put It to the Test: The next time you face a similar adversity in a practice or game, consciously and intentionally adopt the strategy you selected in Step 2. If you chose the Action Model, immediately after practice, seek out a teammate to get reps in with. If you chose the Perspective Model, verbally remind yourself that the mistake is only one variable, and your job is to reset.

Exercise 5: The Post-Game Power Play

Nobody plays a perfect game. What you do after a bad performance defines you more than any save ever will. This exercise combines the best strategies from Haitsma, Smith, and Chan to give you a clear, therapeutic, and actionable plan for moving on.

Step 1: The Mental Detach: The first thing you have to do is take a step back and separate yourself from the game. Do not immediately go home and replay every goal in your head. Do something that brings you genuine happiness and gets your mind off lacrosse such as seeing friends, going for a walk, or talking with your family. As Cheek and Smith suggest, this reminds you that you are more than just a lacrosse goalie, and one game does not define your worth.

Step 2: The Two-Column Journal: After you have had time to clear your head, grab a notebook and a pen. This is the central part of the exercise. Divide a page into two columns:

- **Column 1: Things that Went Well:** Write down at least three things you did well in the game (a tough save, strong communication, a great clear). This is crucial for rebuilding your confidence.
- **Column 2: Things that Didn't Go Well:** List all of the negative things from the game that are still bothering you. Get everything out of your head and onto the paper.

Step 3: The Control-Test Cross-Out: Now for the most critical part of the exercise, adopted from Haitsma. Go back to your "Didn't Go Well" column and physically cross out anything that was entirely out of your control. Did the defense miss a slide? Were there bad calls? Cross them out. By doing this, you are telling your mind that those things are not worth carrying forward. The items left on the list are what you can actually learn from (e.g., low effort, poor communication).

Step 4: Create Your Action Plan: Look at the controllable items left on your list. Now, following Chan's advice, turn these into an actionable plan.

- **Target One Thing:** Pick one specific thing to work on in your next practice or warm-up.

- **Seek External Insight:** Talk to a teammate or coach and ask for their perspective. Tell them what you are working on and ask them to watch for it. A third-person view can often spot the fatal flaw you missed.
- **Strategic Practice:** Use your next practice to deliberately focus on that one skill. Do not just take extra reps for the sake of it; make your time in the crease strategic and efficient.

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- <https://www.news-medical.net/health/Levels-of-Hydration-and-Cognitive-Function.aspx#:~:text=Studies%20have%20shown%20that%20cognitive,fitness%20levels%20and%20dehydration%20tolerance.> (dehydration impairing cognitive function)



Take ownership of your mind.

Are you ready to stop letting self-doubt and mental pressure dictate your performance and finally become the difference-maker your team needs? *The Fearless Lacrosse Goalie* is the essential guide to transforming your game by mastering the most critical piece of equipment you own: your mind. This book moves beyond physical drills to give you a powerful mental operating system, teaching you how to defeat overthinking, instantly build a resilient "Goldfish Memory" after a goal, and effectively harness pressure to fuel elite performance. By applying these specific psychological strategies, you will build an unshakeable confidence that projects command onto the defense, allowing you to react faster, save more shots, and consistently win more games. Step into the cage with true mental toughness and elevate your career from simply playing goalie to mastering it.

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