

Staying Calm Under Pressure

By Jennifer Fisher Bryant

Place-kicker Gary Anderson's tips for performing at your best.

The game is nearly over — only two minutes remain. Players from both football teams line up on either side of the 30-yard line. Ten yards away, place-kicker Gary Anderson of the Minnesota Vikings is waiting for the ball to be snapped. This is the last game of the regular season, and his performance could clinch a playoff spot for his team. Even so, he's relaxed, focused on the spot where his teammate will place the ball. The crowd yells. The noise is deafening, but Anderson remains calm, intent on his job.

The center snaps the ball. It's a good hold. Anderson takes two quick steps and kicks the ball. It sails through the center of the uprights. The referees signal — it's good! The Vikings have earned a spot in the playoffs.

"This guy is dynamite," said Mike Morris, another Vikings player. "I haven't seen him miss one yet." In fact, Anderson did not miss a single field goal or extra point during the entire 1998-1999 regular season. He also led the league in total points scored and broke the NFL record for career field goals.



Gary Anderson is one of the most successful kickers in NFL history.

But even Anderson has had his share of missed kicks. Sometimes, even though he prepares for a kick properly, it just doesn't go through. That's what happened in a 1998-1999 playoff game. "I kicked it like I kick every other one," Anderson said. "But it just didn't go through. That is the way kicking goes. . . ."

Unfortunately, this first missed kick of the year was a big miss. The game went into overtime and the Vikings lost. They didn't go to the Super Bowl.

Without a doubt, Anderson's position as a place-kicker is one of the most stressful jobs in professional sports. It is "all or nothing" when he walks onto the field. Games can be won or lost by a fraction of an inch, within a period of two or three seconds.

How does he handle the pressure? Anderson takes the mental aspect of his position as seriously as the physical aspect. "I practice hard and consistently," he says. "In the big games, experience helps a great deal. Once you've handled challenges successfully — whether it's in sports or any other form of competition — you gain confidence. When the pressure's on again, you can draw on that success and stay relaxed."

Gary Anderson has this advice for young athletes who want to stay relaxed during competition:

- Work hard in practice.
- Visualize success. Imagine yourself scoring a goal, winning the race, or completing a pass.
- Don't dwell on past failures. Try to improve for next time.
- Don't expect to win 100 percent of the time. When you lose, don't make excuses. Make it a learning experience.
- Most important, have fun! Every sport requires skill and self-discipline, but you should enjoy playing, too. That's really what sports are all about.

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