THE PERFORMANCE ACT

FREE ATHLETE GUIDE

BUILD YOUR PRE-PERFORMANCE ROUTINE

A practical, research-informed guide to building a routine that steadies you when it matters, without needing the nerves to disappear first.

Lots of athletes have a routine. A bounce of the ball, a slow breath, a last look at the target. What we often notice is that the way a routine gets used can drift a little off course over time. It turns into a lucky ritual, a long checklist, or a way of trying to make the nerves go away. This guide brings together what the research tells us and turns it into a simple process you can use to build your own routine and practise it until it holds up under pressure.

THE SHORT VERSION

01 Routines help performance, including under pressure. The evidence comes from 33 studies across 15 sports.

02 Simple is enough. One or two pieces you can repeat worked as well as a long list.

03 Your routine is an anchor. Its job isn't to switch the nerves off, it's to give your attention somewhere to come back to.

04 Practise it at training, then with a little pressure, so it's familiar before you need it.

IN THIS GUIDE

01 What a routine is, and what it isn't

02 What the research says

03 A routine is an anchor, not an off switch

04 Build yours in five steps

05 Examples from different sports

06 When things go off script

07 Your routine planner

THE BASICS

01 WHAT A ROUTINE IS, AND WHAT IT ISN'T

A pre-performance routine is a short, set sequence of thoughts and actions you go through before a specific skill. Researchers describe it as a series of task-relevant thoughts and actions that an athlete works through systematically before performing a particular sport skill.

You'll see routines everywhere in sport. A netballer settling before a shot. A tennis player bouncing the ball before a serve. A golfer lining up a putt. A basketballer at the free throw line. A kicker stepping back before a shot at goal.

Two ideas in that description matter most. **Systematic** means you do it the same way, in the same order, with roughly the same timing each time. **Relevant to the task** means each part has a job that connects to the skill you're about to perform. Together, those two things are what separate a routine from a superstition.

A RITUAL

- Lucky socks, the same seat on the bus, the same meal "because it worked last time"
- The link to performance is a feeling, or a memory of a good day
- If it gets disrupted, it can feel like your luck has gone

A ROUTINE

- Guides your attention to the task you're about to perform
- Done the same way each time, and you know why each part is there
- If it gets disrupted, you can still use a shorter version, because you know what each piece is for

There's nothing wrong with enjoying your game day habits. It just helps to know the difference, so your routine is built on things that genuinely support your performance.

WHERE ROUTINES FIT BEST

Routines suit moments where **you decide when to start**: shots at goal, serves, free throws, putts, penalty kicks, lineout throws, a dive, a vault or a bowling run up. These are often called self-paced skills, and most of the research has been done on them. We don't yet know as much about whether routines help with fast, reactive play, like returning a serve or making a quick decision in open play. So this guide focuses on the moments you control.

THE EVIDENCE

02 WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

The clearest summary we have is a meta-analysis by Rupprecht, Tran and Gröpel, published in the *International Review of Sport and Exercise Psychology* (2024). A meta-analysis pools the results of many studies to give a more reliable answer than any single study can. This one combined 112 results from 33 studies, covering 15 sports including golf, basketball, tennis, football, volleyball, gymnastics, bowling and karate.

FINDING	WHAT IT MEANS FOR YOU
ROUTINES HELP	Athletes who used a routine performed better than athletes who didn't, and the difference was moderate to large. Athletes also improved on their own earlier performance after learning a routine, although that change was smaller.
THEY HELP UNDER PRESSURE	The benefit showed up in pressured conditions as well as calmer ones.
SIMPLE IS ENOUGH	Routines with one element, such as a breath or a focus cue, worked as well as routines that combined several. Adding more steps didn't add more benefit.
START WITH A TEMPLATE	Standard routines worked as well as routines designed for the individual. The researchers still suggest shaping your routine around you as you gain experience, because a routine that feels like yours may be easier to stick with.
QUICK TO LEARN	Some studies found benefits after as little as ten minutes of learning, although many studies didn't report learning time.
WORKS ACROSS ATHLETES	The benefit held for athletes aged 11 to 40, for men and women, and for beginners right through to elite athletes.

WORTH KNOWING

The pressure findings are less precise than the others. Fewer studies looked at pressure, and only five used real competition. Most studies tested self-paced skills, and more included men than women. The overall picture is encouraging, and there's still plenty to learn.

WHY MIGHT ROUTINES HELP?

Researchers have suggested a few reasons. A routine can:

- point your attention towards what matters for the skill, and away from distractions
- build a sense of control and confidence before you perform
- give you a clear plan for the next few seconds
- help you manage how activated or anxious you feel

Notice that only one of those is about the nerves. Most of what a routine does is about **attention and having a plan**. That matters a lot for the next section.

THE KEY IDEA

03 A ROUTINE IS AN ANCHOR, NOT AN OFF SWITCH

LET'S TALK ABOUT THE NOISE

Before an important moment, most athletes notice some kind of mental noise. It might be thoughts like "Don't miss this", "Everyone's watching" or "What if I let the team down?" It might be feelings like nerves, doubt or frustration, or physical sensations like a racing heart, shaky hands or tight shoulders. It might be the crowd, the scoreboard, or the mistake you made two minutes ago.

This is normal. Pressure brings noise with it. Researchers studying performance under pressure point out that pressure symptoms are often part of successful performances too, not only poor ones (Carson et al., 2021). Plenty of good performances happen with the noise turned up.

TWO REASONS TO HAVE A ROUTINE

This is where the way a routine is used can drift off course. The same routine can be used for two very different reasons.

"IT'S THERE TO STOP THE NOISE"

The breath is meant to make the nerves disappear. The cue word is meant to block out the doubt. If it works, great. If you still feel nervous, the routine has "failed".

"IT'S SOMEWHERE TO COME BACK TO"

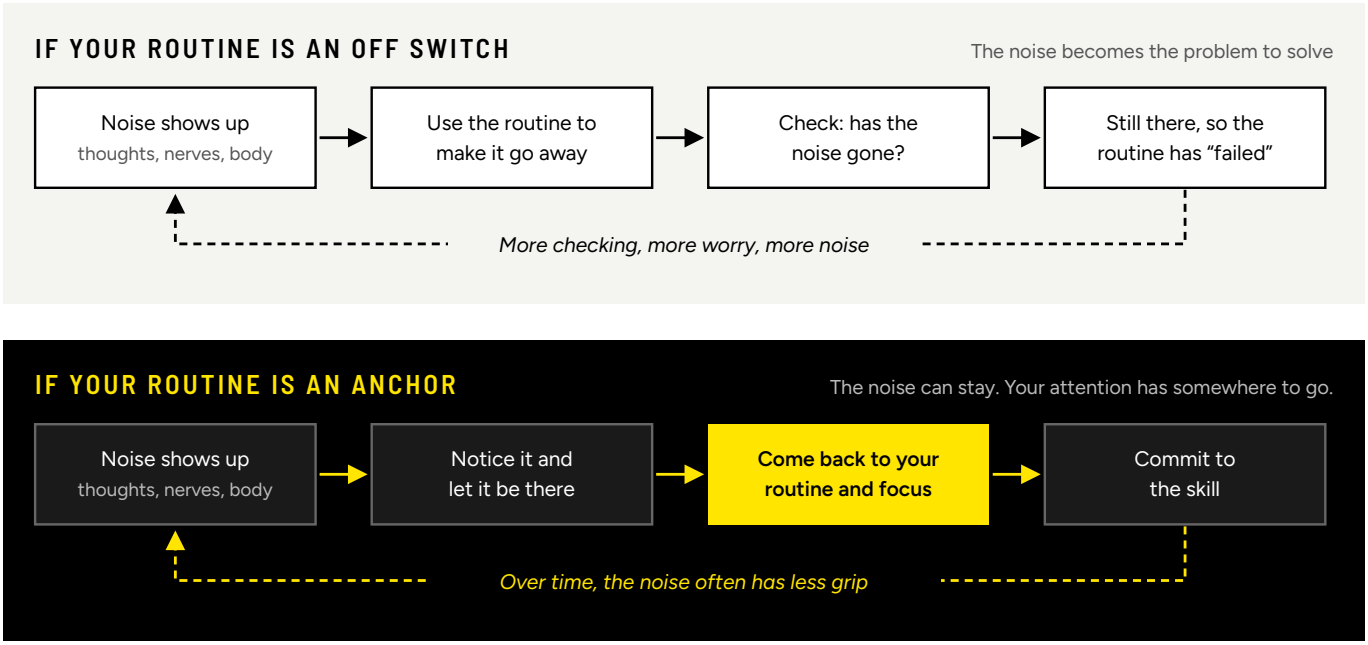
The breath is a familiar starting point. The cue word gives your attention somewhere useful to go. The nerves can come along for the ride, and the routine still does its job.

From the outside, these two athletes look identical. From the inside, they're having very different experiences.

WHY TRYING TO SWITCH OFF THE NOISE OFTEN WORKS BACKWARDS

- **It takes effort.** Trying to push thoughts away or change them takes mental effort, and that effort competes with the attention you need for the skill. Researchers working on mindfulness in sport point out that changing the content of your thoughts asks more of your mind than simply letting them be there (Fournier, 2021).
- **It keeps the noise in the spotlight.** To know whether the noise has gone, you have to keep checking for it. In our experience, the more athletes check, the more they notice it.
- **It turns the routine into a test.** If success means feeling calm, every nervous moment becomes evidence that the routine isn't working. That adds a second layer of worry on top of the first.
- **It makes the routine fragile.** On the days the noise is loudest, which are often the days that matter most, the routine looks least likely to "work".

DIAGRAM 1 | THE SAME NOISE, TWO DIFFERENT LOOPS



The routine and the noise are the same in both loops. What changes is the job you give the routine. When its job is to remove the noise, every nervous moment feeds the loop. When its job is to give your attention somewhere to return, the noise can stay and you can still commit to the skill.

BUILDING FLEXIBILITY

The skill we're aiming for is **flexibility**: being able to go through your routine and commit to the skill whether the noise is quiet or loud. It sounds like a small shift. In practice, it changes a lot.

A helpful sequence from mindfulness work in sport has three parts: **notice** what's showing up, **allow** it to be there without fighting it, then **refocus** on something useful for performance (Fournier, 2021). Your routine is the place you bring your attention back to.

Allowing the noise isn't the same as giving up, agreeing with it, or liking it. You can notice "I'm thinking I'm going to miss" without believing it or arguing with it. One image athletes find useful is watching a train go past. You can see the carriages of thoughts and feelings roll by without jumping on board, and without needing to stop the train.

AN ANCHOR DOESN'T STOP THE WAVES

Think about a boat's anchor. It doesn't calm the sea or stop the wind. Its job is to stop the boat drifting while the water keeps moving. Your routine works the same way. The noise can keep moving around you. The routine stops your attention drifting too far from the task.

OVER TIME, THE NOISE OFTEN LOOSENS ITS GRIP

Something interesting tends to happen when athletes stop fighting the noise. Over weeks of practice, many notice it has less pull. It might still show up, but it doesn't drag them around as much, and it often settles more easily on its own. This isn't the goal of the routine, and it doesn't happen on a set timeline. It's more like a side effect of no longer treating the noise as an emergency.

04

THE PROCESS

BUILD YOURS IN FIVE STEPS

This process brings together the meta-analysis findings and practical guidance from *Advancements in Mental Skills Training* (Bertollo, Filho & Terry, 2021). You can work through it in one sitting, then refine it at training. Use the planner at the end of this guide to write yours down as you go.

1

CHOOSE YOUR MOMENT

ONE SKILL WHERE YOU DECIDE WHEN TO START

Pick a moment that matters to you and comes up often enough to practise: a shot at goal, a serve, a free throw, a putt, a kick, a lineout throw. Then get specific about the window you have.

- **Where does the routine start?** For example, when you receive the ball, or when you step up to the line.
- **How much time do you usually have?** A few seconds, or closer to thirty?
- **What usually gets in the way?** Time pressure, the referee, the crowd, your own thoughts.

Start with one moment. Once that routine feels solid, you can build others.

2

FIND YOUR FOCUS

THE ANCHOR POINT YOUR WHOLE ROUTINE LEADS TO

Before choosing any pieces, decide what your attention most needs to be on as you perform. For most self-paced skills, a useful focus sits outside you: the target, the spot, the ring, the back of the net, or where you want the ball to go. Research on attention suggests that focusing on the result you want, rather than the individual details of the movement, tends to protect skills that are already well learned (Fournier, 2021).

Sometimes a single feel or rhythm cue helps more, especially if a skill is still settling. Researchers looking at performance under pressure suggest keeping it to one or two key parts of the movement, or its overall rhythm, rather than running through a checklist of body positions (Carson et al., 2021). Thinking about too many parts of a movement at once is one of the ways skills get muddled under pressure.

QUESTIONS TO FIND YOUR FOCUS

- ☐ When this skill goes well, where is my attention?
- ☐ What's the one thing that, if I get it right, helps the rest take care of itself?
- ☐ Can I say it in one or two words? For example: "Ring." "Back of the net." "Smooth." "Through."

3 PICK ONE TO THREE PIECES

THE ELEMENTS THAT LEAD YOU TO YOUR FOCUS

These are the pieces tested in the research. Remember that one piece worked as well as several, so there's no need to use them all. Choose one to three that feel natural to you and suit the time you have.

PIECE	WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE	TIPS
BREATH RELAXATION	One slow breath in, with a longer breath out.	Use it as a starting point, not a test of how calm you are. If you feel flat rather than tense, a sharper breath in can lift your energy instead.
SEE IT IMAGERY	Briefly picture the skill and the result you want.	Keep it to a second or two. Include how it looks and how it feels.
CUE WORD SELF-TALK, FOCUS CUE	One word that points at your focus.	Choose a word about what to do, like "smooth" or "through", rather than what to avoid.
EYES ON TARGET QUIET EYE	Let your eyes settle on the target, hold them steady, then go.	Experts tend to settle their gaze on the target earlier and hold it longer before successful attempts, and pressure can shorten that gaze (Crowe et al., 2021).
SAME MOVE PHYSICAL ROUTINE	A small set action, like bouncing the ball twice or adjusting your stance.	Keep it identical each time so it becomes a signal that the skill is coming.
COUNTDOWN TIMING	A set count before you start, like five seconds.	Helps keep your rhythm steady when everything around you speeds up.

MAKING ROOM FOR THE NOISE: "I KNOW THAT … AND …"

A breath can do double duty. One technique from a mindfulness programme used with elite athletes links noticing, allowing and refocusing into a single breath (Fournier, 2021). As you breathe in, quietly name what's showing up: **"I know that I'm thinking about the score …"** As you breathe out, add "and", then name your focus: **"… and ring."** You're not arguing with the thought or trying to remove it. You're acknowledging it and choosing where your attention goes next.

4 PUT IT IN ORDER AND TIME IT

SAME SEQUENCE, SAME RHYTHM, EVERY ATTEMPT

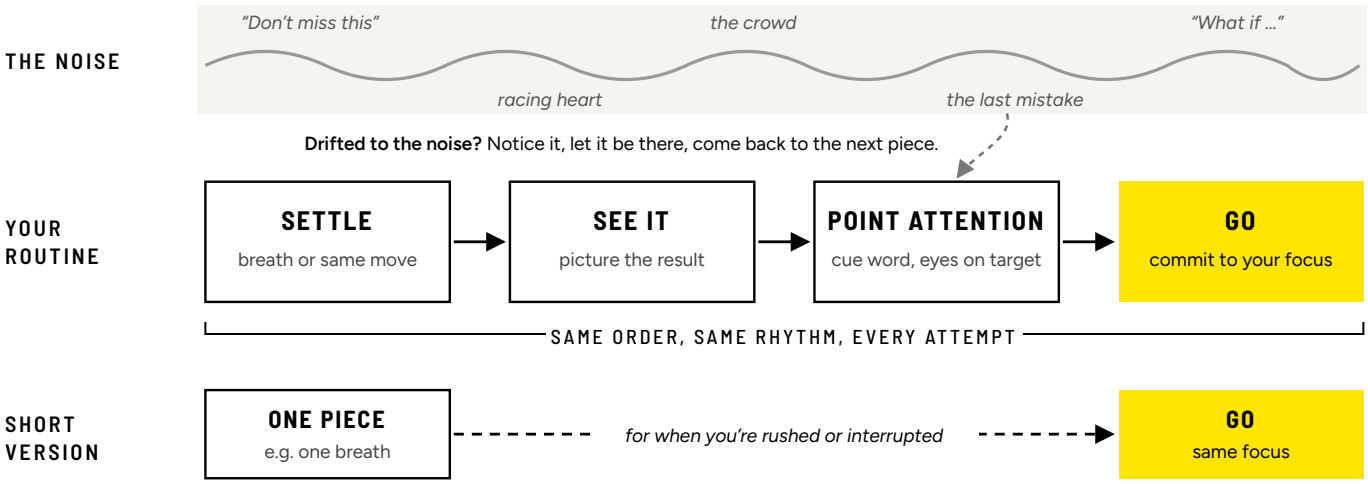
Arrange your pieces so they flow towards your focus and finish just before you perform. A common order is: **settle** (breath or physical move), **see it** (imagery), **point your attention** (cue word, eyes on target), **go**.

Then practise the timing. The aim is for your routine to take roughly the same time on every attempt. A steady rhythm is part of what makes a routine systematic, and focusing on rhythm has been linked with steadier movement under pressure (Carson et al., 2021). Write two versions:

- **Full version:** your normal routine when you have time.
- **Short version:** one piece plus your focus, for when you're rushed, interrupted or the clock is running. For example: "Breath, ring, shoot."

The short version is part of building flexibility. If something interrupts you, there's no need to start again or worry that the routine is "broken". You go to the short version and commit to the skill. And keep the full version short too. If your routine is getting longer every week, or you're adding steps after bad days, that's often a sign it's drifting towards a ritual or a checklist.

DIAGRAM 2 | THE SHAPE OF A ROUTINE, WITH THE NOISE STILL THERE



The noise runs above the whole routine, from start to finish. The routine doesn't wait for it to stop. Each piece leads your attention a step closer to your focus, and if you drift, you simply come back to the next piece. The short version keeps the same destination when time is tight.

5 PRACTISE IT WITH THE NOISE

THE STEP MOST ATHLETES SKIP

In the studies, athletes learned and practised their routine before it was tested under pressure. A routine that only appears on game day is still brand new when the pressure arrives. Build it in stages.

1. **Learn it calmly.** Use your routine on every attempt of that skill at training until it feels familiar.
2. **Add a little pressure.** Once it feels natural, practise with something on the line: keeping score, a small challenge, a consequence, teammates watching, or a coach adding time pressure. Research suggests that training under pressure helps performance when the pressure is real (Carson et al., 2021).
3. **Rehearse the noise in your head.** Use imagery to picture the real situation, including the nerves, your heart rate and the crowd, and see yourself going through your routine anyway. Researchers

recommend building imagery up in layers, adding detail over time, including how pressure feels in your body (Carson et al., 2021).

4. **Practise noticing away from sport.** A few minutes a day of simple breath awareness, noticing when your mind wanders and gently bringing it back, trains the same notice, allow and refocus skill your routine relies on. In one programme, athletes used short daily sessions of around ten minutes, plus a brief scan of their thoughts, feelings and sensations before training (Fournier, 2021).

REVIEW AND ADJUST

After training or competition, review your routine with process questions rather than results. Did I go through my routine? Where did my attention go, and did I bring it back? What noise showed up, and could I let it be there? Did I commit to the skill?

A miss doesn't mean your routine failed, and a make doesn't prove it worked. Look for patterns over a few weeks, change one thing at a time, and keep what's helping. As you gain experience, keep shaping your routine so it fits you.

IDEAS TO ADAPT

05 EXAMPLES FROM DIFFERENT SPORTS

These are examples to spark ideas, not templates to copy. Yours should fit your sport, your skill and you. Each one uses a handful of simple pieces, leads to one clear focus, and has a short version ready for when time is tight.

NETBALL SHOOTER

Set your feet → one slow breath → eyes on the ring → "smooth" → shoot

SHORT VERSION: breath, ring, shoot.

WHEN THE NOISE SHOWS UP: "I know that I'm thinking about the last miss … and ring."

TENNIS SERVE

Two bounces → picture the serve landing → eyes on your spot → "up" → serve

SHORT VERSION: one bounce, spot, serve.

WHEN THE NOISE SHOWS UP: "I know that I'm thinking about double faulting … and spot."

GOLF PUTT

Read the line → one practice stroke for feel → eyes settle on the ball → "roll" → putt

SHORT VERSION: feel, ball, roll.

WHEN THE NOISE SHOWS UP: "I know that my hands feel shaky … and roll."

BASKETBALL FREE THROW

Same three dribbles → long breath out → eyes on the front of the rim → "soft" → shoot

SHORT VERSION: dribbles, rim, shoot.

WHEN THE NOISE SHOWS UP: "I know that I'm aware of the crowd … and soft."

FOOTBALL PENALTY

Place the ball → same steps back → one slow breath → eyes on your corner → "through" → strike

SHORT VERSION: breath, corner, strike.

WHEN THE NOISE SHOWS UP: "I know that the keeper is moving … and corner."

VOLLEYBALL SERVE

Same spot behind the line → two bounces → picture the ball landing → "reach" → serve

SHORT VERSION: bounce, picture, serve.

WHEN THE NOISE SHOWS UP: "I know that I missed the last one … and reach."

TROUBLESHOOTING

06 WHEN THINGS GO OFF SCRIPT

"I GOT RUSHED OR INTERRUPTED."

Go to your short version. One piece, your focus, then commit. That's exactly what it's for.

"I DID MY ROUTINE AND STILL FELT NERVOUS."

That's okay. Removing nerves isn't the routine's job. Ask instead: did I come back to my focus and commit to the skill?

"IT FEELS ROBOTIC."

A routine is a guide, not a cage. Small variations are fine, as long as the order, rhythm and focus stay the same.

"MY ROUTINE KEEPS GETTING LONGER."

Strip it back to one to three pieces. In the research, adding more pieces didn't add more benefit.

"I DID EVERYTHING RIGHT AND STILL MISSED."

Outcomes vary, even for the best athletes in the world. Use the same routine next time, and judge it over weeks, not one attempt.

"I'VE STARTED ADDING LUCKY EXTRAS."

Check each piece: do I know what this is for? If the only reason is that it was there on a good day, it's probably a ritual.

"THE NOISE IS REALLY LOUD."

Use the "I know that … and …" breath. Let the noise be there, name it, and come back to your anchor. If the noise feels overwhelming most of the time, or it's affecting your sleep, mood or life outside sport, that's a sign to talk with someone you trust, such as a parent, coach or a registered psychologist.

QUICK ROUTINE CHECK

- [ ] Do I know why each part of my routine is there?
- [ ] Can I do it the same way, with the same rhythm, each time?
- [ ] Do I practise it at training, as well as on game day?
- [ ] Does it guide my attention to the task?
- [ ] Am I noticing where my focus went, rather than how calm I felt?

GETTING STARTED: YOUR FIRST TWO WEEKS

WEEK 1 | PLAN

Choose your moment and focus, pick your pieces, and write both versions in the planner.

WEEK 1 | LEARN

Use it on every attempt of that skill at training until it feels familiar.

WEEK 2 | ADD PRESSURE

Practise with something on the line, rehearse the noise in your head, and add noticing practice.

WEEK 2 | REVIEW

Use the review questions. Keep what helps, adjust one thing, keep going.

A FINAL WORD

Your routine won't make every attempt go in, and it won't make pressure disappear. What it can do is give you something steady to come back to in the moments that matter to you. Build it simply, practise it often, and take it with you into those moments, noise and all. Over time, it becomes less of a list you get through and more of a place you know how to return to.

07

PRINT IT, FILL IT IN, TAKE IT TO TRAINING

YOUR ROUTINE PLANNER

MY MOMENT — STEP 1

The skill, and where my routine starts

MY FOCUS — STEP 2

One or two words my routine leads to

MY PIECES — STEP 3

Choose one to three: breath, see it, cue word, eyes on target, same move, countdown

MY FULL ROUTINE, IN ORDER — STEP 4

Settle, see it, point your attention, go

MY SHORT VERSION — STEP 4

One piece plus my focus

HOW LONG IT TAKES — STEP 4

Roughly the same every time

THE NOISE THAT USUALLY SHOWS UP

Thoughts, feelings, sensations, situations

MY "I KNOW THAT … AND …" LINE

Name the noise, then name my focus

HOW I'LL PRACTISE IT THIS WEEK — STEP 5

Calmly, at training

With a little pressure

In my head, with the noise

Noticing practice, away from sport

AFTER THE SESSION — REVIEW

- [ ] I went through my routine
- [ ] I noticed where my attention went
- [ ] I let the noise be there
- [ ] I came back to my focus
- [ ] I committed to the skill
- [ ] One thing I'll keep or adjust: _____

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ABOUT THE PERFORMANCE ACT

We're a team of registered psychologists working in sport across Aotearoa New Zealand. We work alongside athletes, coaches, parents and whānau to build practical skills that hold up in training, competition and everyday life.

If you'd like help building your routine, or want to talk about what support could look like for you, we'd love to hear from you. A conversation comes first.

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A NOTE ON THIS GUIDE

This guide is general information to help athletes build skills. It isn't individual advice, and it isn't a substitute for personal support. If you're struggling and need to talk to someone now, you can call or text 1737 any time, free, to reach a trained counsellor. In an emergency, call 111.

WHERE THIS GUIDE COMES FROM

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