

Lolo's No Choke

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TIME:

Choke. The word just sounds so noxious, really. Never mind its ties to suffocation and death. Just say it: choke.

Athletes in particular would like to strangle the scribe who first applied such an ugly term to their most spectacular — and public — failures.

Count Lolo Jones among them. Jones, the telegenic American hurdler, lived through a nightmare in Beijing. With a commanding lead in the 100-m event, on the verge of taking the gold and winning Americans' hearts with her good looks and homeless-to-heroine story, she clipped the ninth hurdle. There are 10 of them. She stumbled across the line to finish in seventh place, then tumbled to the ground in a pool of tears.

Jones is reflective about her failure. "So many people have said they saw my story in Beijing — they're inspired, they picked themselves up," says Jones, who handled the aftermath of her disaster with incredible grace. "I just want to have this story for all of us."

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Jones can recall that night in the Beijing Bird's Nest — Aug. 19, 2008, the night she lost the 100-m-hurdles gold — with surprising clarity. And that might be why she choked. "Often, athletes can tell you exactly what they are doing when they screw up," says Sian Beilock, a psychology professor at the University of Chicago who wrote the book on blowing it — *Choke: What the Secrets of the Brain Reveal About Getting It Right When You Have To*, published in 2010.

Beilock and other scientists who study choking — there are more of them than you might think — suspect that athletes under stress choke when too many thoughts flood the prefrontal cortex, the area of the brain that houses informational memory. Worry, and the brain becomes too busy. It's a misallocation of resources. The motor cortex, which controls the planning and execution of movements, should be doing most of the work for experienced athletes.

Read the whole story: [TIME](#)