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At the 2009 ICAS Convention, Dr. Steven Jarvis presented a study on human factors during the Performer Safety Debrief. This study involved a survey that was distributed to U.S. and European air show performers regarding several questions.

Two questions in this survey provided some valuable insight into the mind of a performer. The survey asked performers both “What show was your worst show of the year?” and “At what show did you come closest to dying?” Interestingly, the data showed that the worst show for most performers was NOT the show that they felt to be the most dangerous.

In his presentation, Dr. Jarvis discussed the findings of his study which determined that during the act of doing something unsafe, we do not think that we are actually doing something unsafe. This postulation, when viewed from the outside, provides much insight onto the difference between the practice environment and the air show environment. It has been noted that there is a transformation from Joe Pilot practicing his routine in his practice box to Joe Pilot performing in front of 75,000 people.

This change in attitude, bravado and adrenaline is not specific to air show performers. Ask Peyton Manning, Michael Jordon or Derek Jeter about the difference between practice and game time. You’ll likely find that the pressure adds many new factors to the equation. Often, this pressure provides adrenaline which numbs our bodies and minds to the emotions, pain and sensations that one typically would experience. This is where the danger lurks: during the course of a performance, we sometimes ignore or fail to recognize the usual warning signs the body gives.

Because of this deadening of senses, the performance feels different than the practice and performers may fall into the trap of feeling more capable than the limits of the body and/or the airplane would normally suggest.

As most experienced performers have discovered, the only solution is consistency. Plan your practice; practice what you planned. Practice distractions. Practice irregularities. Envision as many possible scenarios that can cause you to deviate from your planned show and practice ad nauseam. And when you are overcome by the urge to alter your routine or performance from that which you have practiced, you will be better able to recognize it as the bad and dangerous idea that it is. Through repetition and muscle memory, you will coach yourself to recognize when you are putting yourself into a situation that is induced by adrenaline and 75,000 spectators. When that happens, your mind and body will know exactly what to do and how to respond.