

Mental Preparation

A SEQUENTIAL OUTLINE FOR A COMPREHENSIVE MENTAL TRAINING PROGRAM

1. TEAM BUILDING: Key concept - “We are one”.

Approximate duration - three weeks (2 x 45 min./wk)

Focal activities:

- a) Team code of conduct toward coaches, teammates, opponents and the public.
- b) Team members getting to know each other.
- c) Communication within team about topics relating to the team or the sport, e.g., dealing with pain, pressures of winning, concepts of the ideal coach.
- d) Orientation toward the approaching season.

2. MOTIVATION - GOAL SETTING: Key concept - “I Can do anything I really want to.”

Approximate duration - two weeks

Focal activities:

- a) Clearing up each individual’s motivations and reasons to participate in sport and what he/she hopes to derive.
- b) Team goals set through general team discussion.
- c) Individual goals for season set by each team member.
- d) Developing will (want) power.
- e) Discussions centering on time management - effective planning of time utilization to meet goals.

3. ATTENTION CONTROL: Key concept - “I keep myself in the here and now”.

Approximate duration - two weeks

Focal activities:

- a) Discussion of what concentration involves.
- b) Mind control and concentration training exercises; narrowing exercises, breath control, pain awareness, watch exercise, broadening exercises; awareness of objects in space, sport specific slides, etc.
- c) Learning to expand and contract awareness and when each is necessary.
- d) Dealing with distractions; observing the mind at work; (monitoring your own awareness - concentration - distraction). Focusing on contextual clues - ignoring distraction.

4. EMOTIONAL CONTROL: Key concept - “I remain calm and in control”.

Approximate duration - three weeks

Focal activities:

- a) Discussion of relationship between arousal and performance.
- b) Experiencing relaxation training techniques.
- c) Devising individual arousal control strategies and personalized cue words and cue images - pick the most effective relaxing method for you.

Mental Preparation

5. **BODY AWARENESS: Key concept - “I move with self-awareness”.**

Approximate duration - one week

Focal activities:

- a) Discussion of differences between moving with awareness and moving without awareness; awareness of body position, stiffness, etc.
- b) Interaction between body awareness and arousal control; (sensitive to personal stress indicators)
- c) Developing awareness of individualized stress reaction profiles.
- d) Experiencing Feldenkrais training exercises.

6. **SELF-CONFIDENCE: Key concept - “I believe totally in my own infinite power”.**

Approximate duration: two weeks

Focal activities:

- a) Establishing critical importance of self-confidence in performances.
- b) Discussion of self-talk and how it affects self-esteem.
- c) Analysis of and change as necessary of each team member's self-talk emphasizing the positive; think positive - reinforce positive thoughts – stamp-out (punish) negative thoughts.
- d) Building and maintaining self-confidence through repeated personal affirmation statements.
- e) Team members as a group write their own team affirmations.

7. **VISUALIZATION: Key concept - “I program my body through mental pictures”.**

Approximate duration: three weeks

Focal activities:

- a) Discussion of right brain/left brain differences and critical role of mental imagery in instructing the body what to do and how to do it.
- b) Developing and expanding the imagination and mental imagery through training exercises.
- c) Uses of visualization in athletics and practice sessions on each application.

8. **COGNITIVE INTERVENTIONS AND MANIPULATIONS: Key concept - “I am what I think”.**

Approximate duration: two weeks

Focal activities:

- a) Establishing the power of thoughts, the influence of thoughts on feelings, establishing the subjectiveness of reality.
- b) Uses of cognitive manipulation in athletics including arousal control and pain management.
- c) Learning how to manipulate one's cognitions.
- d) Recognizing and dealing with irrational fears.

9. **MENTAL PREPARATION FOR COMPETITION: Key concept - “I mentally prepare myself for every competition”.**

Approximate duration: three weeks

Focal activities:

- a) Developing a comprehensive individual mental approach prior to competing.
- b) Having a carefully prepared and effective count-down of what to do when - one week prior until the moment of competition.
- c) Engaging in strategy planning and development of workable solution banks.

THE IDEAL PERFORMANCE STATE (IPS)

12 categories of “feelings”→ Ideal Performance

1. Physically relaxed
2. Energized
3. Low anxiety
4. Enjoyment
5. Mental calmness
6. Automatic
7. Effortless
8. In control
9. Self confident
10. Optimistic
11. Alert and ready
12. Focused

When athletes “feel” this way, they succeed. If not, there is a gap between their potential and their actual performance. YOU PLAY WELL BECAUSE YOU FEEL GOOD, not the other way around.

You cannot control all of your circumstances but you can always control your reaction to them. YOUR FEELINGS - By learning to CONTROL YOUR FEELINGS, rather than having your feelings control you, YOU CONTROL YOUR ABILITY TO PERFORM WELL.

THE “OLYMPIAN”

The model of a high level performer

1. understand the role model
2. use it - adapt the model to help you in your weaker components

The Olympian has displayed 10 LEARNED HABITS that created the Ideal Performance State (IPS). Good “feelings” which allowed him/her to excel...

1. Motivation
2. Commitment
3. Determination
4. Accountability
5. Positive Optimism
6. Mental Alertness and Focusing
7. Handling Pressure
8. Self-Discipline
9. Self-Confidence
10. Self-Realization

What follows is a blueprint of an “Olympian”.

LEARNED HABITS

1. MOTIVATION

- inner drive starts with a purpose: "WIN THE PROVINCIAL CHAMPIONSHIP"
- fuel the drive by a series of successes:
 - winning club games
 - performing well in spiels
 - winning in every possible way -- with a lead, from behind, in close games, when not at your best, when you're not feeling well or tired or hurt

HOW DOES THE OLYMPIAN STAY MOTIVATED?

A. HAVE A DREAM

- it must be yours
- it must be real
- use your imagination to see yourself achieving the dream

B. SET INTERMEDIATE GOALS

Stepping stones that are challenging, realistic and measurable.

- win zones/region/southerns
- win 75% of cash spiel games
- personal performance goals
- win Major League - qualify in a top position (1st, 2nd or 3rd)

C. SET SHORT TERM GOALS

- give 100% in practice
- create a positive constructive attitude
- require something more of yourself each week - walking, biking, stair climbing, diet consciousness, sleep and rest, leisure and relaxation

FOCUS ONLY on doing the best you can AT THE MOMENT and be TRUE to yourself.

There will be another time to focus on team. Your short term goals must be personal, realistic and yours.

2. COMMITMENT

- no holding back
- 100% effort
 - sometimes you will have to persevere through things you'd rather avoid
- total commitment
 - positive energy
 - positive attitude
 - team purpose and a collective resolve to succeed
- commit, without precondition, to each other

3. DETERMINATION

- An obstacle is only a CHALLENGE to your talents.
- There is ALWAYS a way to win!
- Control your response to setbacks:
 - “I’m at my best when obstacles are at their worst.”
 - “No problems, no greatness!”
 - “I am able and I will overcome - in the face of a problem my skill will prevail.”
- PERSEVERE - determination is not simply wanting to win, it is a RESOLVE to do so
 - in the face of any obstacle or setback.

4. ACCOUNTABILITY

The Olympian takes full responsibility for his/her actions:

- no excuses
- no blame
- no second guessing

ACCEPT that mistakes and setbacks are inevitable. DO NOT ACCEPT that you cannot do something about them. ACCEPT constructive criticism, learning from your experience and the objective analysis of our mentor WITHOUT FEELING REJECTED OR PUT DOWN.

Mistakes: - learning and understanding
 - correction
 - progress

If you are upset by mistakes, especially your own, you will not adjust and no progress will be gained.

Mistakes are kept to a minimum when you hold the right “feelings” (IPS) and there is no better cure for mistakes than this IPS.

THE MANAGEMENT OF MISTAKES is handled effectively by positive feelings and by the acceptance of error as a means to improvement.

BAD ATTITUDES -- self doubt, anger, negativism and over-arousal which inhibits your ability to play well.

HOW DO I MAINTAIN ACCOUNTABILITY?

1. What did I do wrong?
2. How do I correct it?
3. Relax, be optimistic and execute the correction.
4. DON’T overplay the situation - relate to basics:
 - Inturn, normal weight, nail the broom.
5. ACCEPT that it is okay to make a mistake – what is NOT okay is to react badly to making the error.

5. POSITIVE OPTIMISM

- high positive energy -- alert, lively, enthusiastic, team spirit, eager
-- intensity, "pumped up"

- HOW?

- have fun
- enjoy the challenge
- believe that you will win

- Create the package of feelings that leads to positive energy -- success!

MANAGING POSITIVE ENERGY is a LEARNED SKILL

- negativism comes from anger, anxiety, fear, tension and resentment

FRUSTRATION → POOR PERFORMANCE

FIGHT IT OFF WITH POSITIVE THINKING AND BY DOING WHAT YOU DO BEST!

Attitudes are nothing more than HABIT OF THOUGHT.

Top performers are disciplined thinkers. They control positive thoughts and therefore, positive energy.

"I will do my best."

"I will focus on doing the best I can at this moment."

"I am proud of our team and our abilities."

"I can do this...we can do this."

Negative thinking (about yourself, about teammates, about the situation) undermines confidence, enthusiasm, perseverance and erodes inner strength. It reduces your ability to perform AND it reduces the team's ability to perform.

Our patterns of thought are important. We are programming ourselves for either success or failure.

DO NOT KID YOURSELF that negativism is harmless, even if self-directed, it is draining on EVERYBODY.

THE ABILITY TO BECOME A GREAT COMPETITOR DEMANDS YOU CONTROL ALL NEGATIVISM.

HOW?

1. Listen to a positive inner voice
2. Refuse to accommodate negative thoughts - start repeating positive constructive thoughts.
3. Reduce the task to basics - do what you do best. Program yourself and the team for success.

6. MENTAL ALERTNESS AND FOCUSING

- great performance demands concentration.

- Concentration - calm, strength, positive energy, confidence with the proper blend of concentration and alertness, action “flows”, no anxiety...no tension...no fear (e.g. “going with the flow” vs “fighting yourself”).
- Concentrate mentally on what you are doing physically (e.g. visualization).
- Focus solely on THE TASK AT HAND - deal with what is REAL, not imagined. BELIEVE what you see until something requires you to change the real view.
- Focusing demands concentration and adaptability.
- You MUST deal with the situation as it is presented to you, not as you’d like it to be. Be flexible enough to adapt to what is really there.

7. HANDLING PRESSURE

- Optimal performers DO NOT play well under pressure!

- Optimal performers PLAY WELL in pressure situations precisely because they have eliminated or significantly reduced and controlled the perception of “pressure” by maintaining their IPS.

HOW?

1. Reduce the task to basics.
2. No negativism.
3. Focus solely on the task at hand, NOT on the consequences.

THE PLAYER WHO FOLDS...

- becomes frustrated
- has a high anxiety level
- negative and pessimistic
- muscles tighten
- structures the situation in his/her mind so that it becomes a threat
- is controlled by the situation
- worries about the results
- is easily distracted

THE PLAYER WHO EXCELS...

- is determined and resolved
- has high positive energy but low anxiety and fear
- remains optimistic
- muscles are relaxed
- focuses solely on the task
- sees the tough situation as a challenge not a threat
- understands that a challenge is under one’s own control and therefore controls the situation
- results take care of themselves!

THE MAJOR WAY AN OLYMPIAN TRANSFORMS A THREAT INTO A CHALLENGE IS BY:

**FOCUSING SOLELY ON DOING HIS/HER BEST
AT THAT MOMENT AND IN THAT SITUATION.**

DO NOT dwell on the consequences!

8. SELF DISCIPLINE

- Do what you have to do to reach your goal
 - use role models
 - develop a strong belief in your ability to succeed
 - set priorities - for yourself
 - for your team
 - seek and accept the help of an experienced knowledgeable mentor/coach - trust in their direction and guidance
 - acquire the knowledge to improve
 - develop the personal mechanics to enhance your skills
 - have persistence and confidence - errors are feedback for learning
 - enjoy the journey to the goal - it helps to maintain the motivation needed for the long haul
 - self discipline thinking will allow you to control your reactions to situations rather than being controlled by them

The Olympian controls her responses to situations to remain mentally calm, focused and free of anxiety. You cannot control all circumstances but you can control your responses!!

9. SELF CONFIDENCE

- Believe in yourself, your team and your collective ability to perform well.

HOW?

- don't take foolish risks that may lead to failure - PLAY TO YOUR STRENGTHS
- evaluate the situation, identify choices, select the best FOR THE SITUATION
- be decisive - if your decision is wrong you will find out soon enough and learn for the next time
- expect to succeed - understand the depth of your talent and abilities
- think positively - the beliefs you lock into your mind are often self-fulfilling prophecies
- bounce back after mistakes - neither dwell on nor be indifferent to errors - they are inevitable and they are entirely manageable
- Give your FULL concentration to the task - have all the tools to meet the challenge
- undertake full mental and physical preparation

10. SELF REALIZATION

- follows directly from self confidence
- believe in yourself - FEEL GOOD → perform well → FEEL EVEN BETTER!
- the Olympian RECOGNIZES and is CONSTANTLY WORKING to win the contest within himself/herself
- self discipline and self control → a self confidence and a better understanding of yourself
- recognize limits - DO ONLY THE BEST YOU CAN AT THE MOMENT
- require of yourself a recognition of how the model Olympian can be used to enhance your abilities by
 - ... being the best you can be
 - ... doing the most with what you have
 - ... understanding your talent and skill as an athlete and a person
 - ... accepting responsibility for yourself and your role in the team concept.

Remember, these are all LEARNED HABITS

MENTAL FITNESS

MENTAL FITNESS AND SPORTS PSYCHOLOGY

MENTAL FITNESS

“Sports is 90% mental and the other half physical” (Yogi Berra)

To be the best, top athletes know that it's not enough to be physically fit. You have to be mentally fit as well.

Mental fitness is a state of performance -- a readiness and ability to meet the psychological demands of high performance situations. Like physical fitness, it is achieved through a program of regular exercises designed to develop specific skills. When you are mentally fit, you can call up those psychological skills in high pressure situations.

In sport psychology, helping the athlete develop a positive mindset during competition is a key concept. At The Centre for High Performance, we believe that same concept can be applied to high performance situations outside the athletic arena. The mastering of psychological skills creates champions in life as well as in sport.

Mental fitness is the essential element in consistent high performance and long term health.

Mental fitness can yield a three fold return on investment -- long term health, skills in preparation for important events and managing the moment-to-moment stresses of everyday life.

How we think and how we react to what happens to us is proving to be the key to superior athletic performance, business success and resistance to illness.

YOUR HEAD AND YOUR HEALTH

Research and studies now demonstrate the dramatic effect of how our head affects our health.

The Grant Study, published in 1976, tracked several hundred college graduates for over 35 years. In comparing “best” or “worst” outcomes, researchers discovered that the “best” outcomes group had developed a different set of psychological strategies to handle life's ups and downs.

At age 40, there were no appreciable differences in physical health between the two groups. Fifteen years later, 90% of the “best” group had been free of major illness. By contrast, 37% of the “worst” group suffered from chronic illness and 13% of the group had died.

The Hardiness Study (1984) of Illinois Bell executives clearly demonstrated that mental strength and the psychological characteristics of challenge, control and commitment were more important buffers to illness than exercise or social support.

A post-Olympic study of Canadian athletes clearly showed that those who did their personal best at the 1984 Summer Olympics used mental imagery three times as much as those who did not perform up to expectations. The athletes who did well handled distractions more effectively and were able to attend to the business of high performance.

The new field of psychoneuroimmunology is the study of how psychological states impact the immunological system. The early evidence is showing how personality patterns and attitudes are linked to illness and health.

THE SILVER SEVEN

Mental fitness is the mind's readiness and ability to handle the psychological demands of high performance in everyday life. Mental fitness is a powerful way to change behaviour and influence health.

The Centre for High Performance has created a unique Mental Fitness Program consisting of seven core skills drawn from the high performance arena of elite sports.

These seven skills, which we call the **Silver Seven**, can help you achieve consistent health, high performance and realize your personal vision.

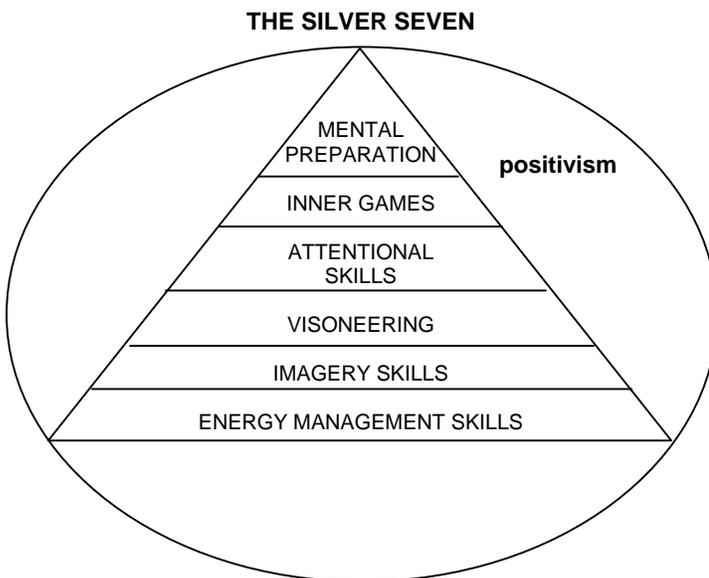
You can also avoid coming down on yourself during a weak performance by separating criticism from your actions and clarifying where the problem actually lies.

You can turn negativism into positivism by using such skills as reframing and retracing:

2. ENERGY MANAGEMENT

Sustained high pressure can lead to burnout. The skill of energy management enables you to effectively manage your personal level of arousal for high performance.

Arousal levels are tied to attentional focus. The higher the level of arousal, the narrower the attentional focus. Average performers perform best at a lower level of arousal. Their broader attentional focus helps them take in vital information in their surroundings, avoiding costly mistakes of omission.

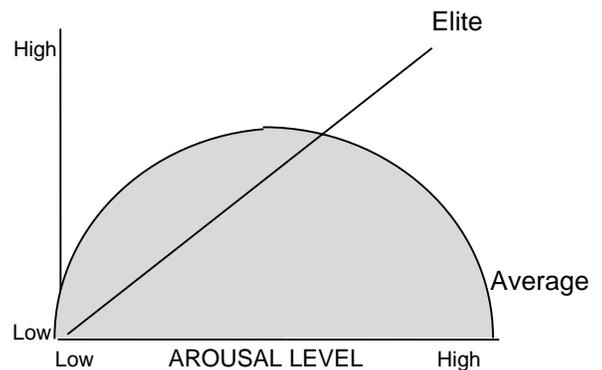


1. POSITIVISM

Positivism is an attitude and a skill. It is a pre-condition to the development of the other six mental fitness skills. To make these skills work for you, you must have positive expectations about yourself and your performance.

People choose to be positive or negative, prosperity-conscious or poverty-conscious. The first step in mental fitness is to choose not to be a victim, to remain prosperity-conscious in pressure situations.

For example, you can look for the opportunity in a crisis and take decisive action to resolve the situation at hand.



Elite performances can use a higher level of arousal that allows them to direct total attention to their task and avoid errors of information overload.

You must learn to identify your own optimal arousal level. You can do this by assessing your arousal levels during past best performances and recreating them in the pressure situations at hand.

To control your arousal and energy levels, you can use such skills as relaxation and centering.

3. VISIONEERING

Successful visioneering gives you a shot in the arm, increasing the energy and commitment you need to achieve your goals.

Visioneering combines vision-building (getting a clear sense of where you want to go) with goal-setting and imagery. You build your vision first, align your goals and game plan with that vision and then image yourself having reached your goals.

Visioneering works because your subconscious mind doesn't know the difference between real and imagined experiences. Therefore, it means the vision and goals you commit to your subconscious are easily within your grasp.

4. ATTENTIONAL SKILLS

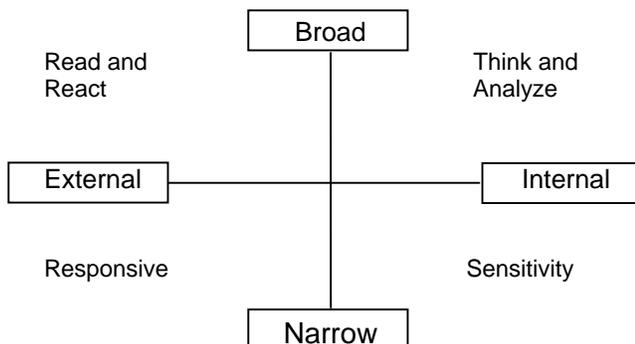
How you pay attention and where your attention is directed under stress can work for or against you. Paying attention to how you pay attention can yield a surprising return on your investment.

You need different attentional styles for different high-performance situations. There are two dimensions to attention -- broad versus narrow; and external versus internal.

A broad focus means paying attention to many things simultaneously. A narrow focus, by contrast, is paying attention to one thing at a time.

An external focus means attention is directed outside the self. Internal refers to paying attention to what's inside you.

The Attentional Dimensions



The four main attentional choices from this are -- **broad external** -- surveying the environment, reading the situation as it develops; **broad internal** -- thinking,

planning and analyzing; **narrow internal** -- paying attention to one thing or thought inside yourself and **narrow external** -- zeroing in on one thing out there at a time.

Mental preparation can help you in three ways:

- managing the unexpected
- preparing for the big event
- targeting for long-term goals

Your mental preparation should become a habit -- a systematic, progressive diet of the appropriate psychological messages and mental practice rituals you need to get to your best performance level. It should be a custom-designed program that combines planning and mental practice. It must be formalized and in line with your goals and strategies. Your program must reflect this simple approach:

1. **Develop your mental strategy.**
2. **Carry out your mental strategy.**

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MENTAL TOUGHNESS TIPS

1. Body image is the key to enhancing your motivation, intimidating your opponent, and keeping a winning attitude. A strong body image leads to mental strength. Stance: head up, chin horizontal, shoulders back, and an energetic walk.
2. Complaining distracts you from “being in the now!” You will only take your game farther away from the last shot. Erase the mistake, then visualize the correct response, and get ready for the next shot.
3. “Quality Practice” leads to “Quality Results.” You should play only your best whenever you go on the ice, otherwise you will incorporate mistakes into your game. “There is only one way to play - your best!”
4. Coachability is a great asset. A positive attitude towards improvement leads to a positive result. You need to create positive energy to improve. Think positive.
5. “I will find a way!” Top players always know that they will find a way to win! Be creative, patient, and ready ... dig deep within.
6. The tougher the situation, the more energy there is available for you to try things and take your game to a higher level. Relax and enjoy the competition and press the envelope on your game.
7. Never let your opponents see your negative emotions! Always look loose, relaxed, and ready to go. The most consistent neuromuscular contractions happen when your muscles are relaxed, not tense. Stay loose ... breathe deep.
8. Rituals/routines create the mind/body blueprint of your perfect shot(s) ... use them. Pre-delivery, etc. List your rituals.
9. Love what you do and do what you love. Curling is for fun, enjoyment, and self-challenge.
10. A great player has great practice sessions too. Quality builds quality and consistency.

In talking with and reading what the experts say ... 80% of the game is mental, if not more. (When he finished in the semi-finals of the 1991 US Open, Jimmy Connors said: “The mental part of the game is 90%”). If this is true, I urge you to take the time to take the test on the next page ... and be honest with yourself. Then, take the appropriate steps. Make the necessary improvements to move one step closer to becoming that mentally tough player you’ve always dreamed about. You - and only you - can make it a reality. Good luck!!

MENTAL TOUGHNESS TRAINING: Be Your Best Under Pressure

By Lisa Brown

Lisa Brown is a mental toughness training consultant who works with athletes to improve their competitive edge. Her clients include the Olympic Women's Softball Team, the National Curling Development Centre, and the International High Performance Female Hockey Program. Lisa has also used mental training extensively as a world class athlete in the sport of ringette in which she has won 3 World Championships.

As an athlete, have you ever wondered...

- Why you are so much better on some days than others?
- How do be your best under pressure?
- How athletes like Michael Jordan and Wayne Gretzky always play great?

You're not alone.

Most athletes ask themselves these questions almost every day of their lives – and for good reason: they're all questions about mental toughness.

As an athlete, you probably also know the emotional ups and downs of competing. Maybe you've gone into a competition sick with fear, hoping for that magical performance. Maybe you've turned on yourself halfway through an event, thinking, "Why are you even bothering to try? You're hopeless today." Or worse, maybe you've been crushed by failure in your most important competition, left to face the dark night of the soul, that time when you feel like all hope is gone and there's no point in carrying on in your sport.

A 3 time World Champion in the sport of ringette, I've also known the agony and the ecstasy of sport. I know how easy it is to fight with yourself when competing. As a young player, I remember praying before the "big" game that I would score at the right moment so I wouldn't let my team down. I remember being jealous at the success of others and devastated by failure when I didn't get the goals I so desperately wanted.

That is, until I learned about mental toughness training.

Mental training – training our minds and emotions to handle the pressure of competing – changed my life. Since then, I've taught hundreds of athletes the same skills and watched them turn into tough competitors who relish the challenge of the battle.

I believe that mental toughness training is the answer to getting what you want in sport. Why? Because mental toughness gives you the ability to perform at your best when you want to, even in your most important events.

In fact, my work with athletes has convinced me that **how much you know about mental toughness – and how mentally tough you are** – will determine how high you'll rise in your sport and how much fun you'll have along the way. This is because at the highest level of sport, most athletes have similar levels of skill. It's the ability to perform well under pressure that separates athletes who reach their goals from those who don't.

Today I'll explain what mental toughness is, how it can help you, and how you can get started right away becoming more mentally tough.

WHAT IS MENTAL TOUGHNESS?

"I was great in practice. Everyone expected me to win, but I was always second or third, always missing one dive, and I didn't know why. Every time I went into a big meet I missed something. In big competitions I was third, and I could have easily won. It really hurt me all the time.

The biggest problem facing athletes today is the lack of good mental preparation...I could have been the best a lot earlier than I was but at that time I wasn't clear on how to improve the mental aspect".

--Sylvie Bernier, Canada, 1984 Olympic Champion, Springboard Diving.¹

Mental toughness is the ability to perform at your best when you want to.² This is why when we talk about mental toughness, we think of athletes like Michael Jordan and Wayne Gretzky. They usually play terrific under pressure.

Mental Preparation

How do you become mentally tough? **You become mentally tough by getting yourself to feel a certain way – mentally and physically – before your event and then keeping these feelings throughout the event.**

Why? **Because how you feel controls how you perform.** You know this instinctively: if you're afraid, negative, and insecure, you'll struggle. But if you're confident, positive, and determined, you're likely to bring forth your best.³

WHAT FEELINGS DO YOU NEED TO CREATE?

Close your eyes and think back to your last really awesome performance. Do you remember how you felt? Probably something like this:

- You felt mentally relaxed, physically energized, confident, focused, and positive.
- You stayed in the present and focused on the task at hand.
- You brought forth the right emotions at the right time – determination, confidence, or energy.
- You loved the challenge. The worse things got, the more determined you got to overcome the odds.
- You supported yourself. When you made mistakes, you forgave yourself.
- You were positive with others around you.
- You had fun, trusted your body, and enjoyed competing.
- You believed in yourself and your ability to get the job done.
- You gave every ounce of physical effort you had, ignoring pain and fatigue.⁴

The good news is that creating these feelings is a learned ability...all you have to do is learn some basic mental toughness skills and practices.

THE “HOWS” OF MENTAL TOUGHNESS

So far we've learned that if you get yourself to feel a certain way throughout your competition, chances are you'll perform well. But how do you do this?

Mental toughness is an achievement over time. To be mentally tough, you need to develop both the **skills** and **practices** of mental toughness. Mentally tough athletes are different in 2 ways:

1. They bring excellent mental and emotional skills to competition. Some examples are:

- mentally overcoming the bad things that happen in competition
- imagining themselves doing their sport (mental rehearsal)
- relaxing themselves
- concentrating on the task in front of them
- paying attention to what they need to do technically to win
- solving problems in competition

2. They have specific mental toughness practices. Some examples are:

- setting goals for each time they practice
- training with intense effort
- imagining themselves winning big events before going to sleep at night
- doing specific things to prepare themselves before the start of an event
- deciding what they'll think about at different points in the competition
- Evaluating themselves after competing⁵

You may be wondering what “skills” and “practices” are. **Skills** are techniques you've learned through repetition and practice. For example, mentally tough athletes are skilled at thinking positive thoughts in difficult moments so they stay confident. **Practices** are actions you repeat a lot. For example, the very best athletes have a planned pre-competition routine that gets them to feel the feelings they need to have before competing.

To be mentally tough, you need to develop both the skills and practices of mental toughness.

WHERE DO YOU START?

A great place to start becoming mentally tough is to learn how to imagine yourself doing your sport in vivid detail. Imagining yourself competing is called mental rehearsal. Many people think of it as making pictures with our eyes closed, but it's more powerful than that.

“I've been doing imagery for at least 6 or 7 years. I get better and better. In the beginning I didn't even get a picture, or anything, but I thought about my race and how it should be. I didn't really see myself skate, not the same way I do now. It was more like being inside without doing the movements...Now I “see” it and “feel” it.”

–Gaetan Boucher, 1984 Olympic Double Gold Medalist, Speed Skating.⁶

Mental rehearsal should be kinesthetic too. This means that you should get the feeling of the moves. Eventually, you want to be able to “see” yourself performing in your sport just the way you want to do it in reality. If you already daydream about your sport, mental rehearsal should be easy for you!

Here is your mental **toughness training assignment** for the next 3 weeks:

1. Each night before falling asleep, spend 5-10 minutes imagining yourself performing in your sport. See and feel yourself executing these moves perfectly and feel the positive emotions you get from being so successful.
2. Spend 5 minutes before and after practice imagining the most important parts of your event. Make sure the images are positive (doing what you want) and as vivid as possible.
3. While competing or practicing, each time you make an error take a moment to visualize doing it right the next time.

Tips on Mental Rehearsal

1. Do it from the “inside” for the maximum effect. That is, visualize as though you are seeing everything from inside your own body.
2. Go for the “full treatment” – get all your senses (sight, sound, smell, hearing) involved.

3. Move when you visualize if this helps you develop an image.
4. If images aren’t coming immediately, practice visualizing right after training or practicing.
5. Learn from your imagery – replay what works!
6. Don’t get discouraged if the image breaks up on you. This is normal. Just do it and do it.
7. Use a walkman and high tempo music if this inspires you.

Notes

- 1 Orlick and Partington, *Psyched: Inner Views of Winning*, 1986.
- 2 Mental toughness: James E. Loehr, *The New Toughness Training for Sports*, 1994.
- 3 The term “Idea Performance State” and the concept that to perform at our peak we must get ourselves into an IPS and stay in it was popularized in James E. Loehr’s *Mental Toughness Training for Sports*, 1982. It’s also been referred to as competing “in the zone”.
- 4 James E. Loehr, *Mental Toughness Training for Sports*, 1982.
- 5 Many of the skills and practices of mental toughness were identified and explained by Terry Orlick in his excellent volume *Psyching for Sport*, 1986.
- 6 Orlick and Partington, *Psyched: Inner Views of Winning*, 1986.

THE PERFORMANCE COCKTAIL

By Bill Tschirhart
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I don't do clinics very often in my position as National Development Coach but having said that, every coach is part clinician each time he/she works with his/her athletes from a technical perspective. But on those occasions when I assume my role as **Dr. Delivery**, I find that something inside me causes me to spend as much time off the ice with the athletes attending the clinic as I do on the ice working with them to improve their technique.

It's my judgment that a sound technical delivery without understanding the "warm side of the glass" elements that in concert with that sound technical delivery, allow us to perform (i.e. make shots under the pressure of competition) is like building a house starting with the roof!

There are six ingredients in the *Performance Cocktail* and to be sure, the first and most important is a fundamentally sound delivery that is not only executed by the athlete but understood as well. During my tenure as National Development Coach at the National Training Center here in Calgary Alberta I have worked hard to get athletes to take initial steps toward the goal of understanding what they do as well as being able to do it.

Step one is to be able to describe in detail all the elements that comprise the curling delivery. No detail is irrelevant!

Step two involves having the delivery recorded visually via video tape.

Step three is a marriage of the first two. Compare the perception of the curling delivery (the written description) with what is really happening (the video playback). Only when perception and reality are brought together can an athlete and clinician join forces in delivery analysis. It is much better for the athlete to be able to see weaknesses and know how to correct them than for Dr. Delivery to point them out and make suggestions. That isn't going to happen all of the time but I'm amazed that when given the opportunity, more athletes than I ever imagined could do it quite well. Every athlete should be afforded this opportunity. Nothing can be lost in the attempt and much can be gained. At the NTC, we call this "Empower the Athlete". It's not always going to be 100% successful. But even if the athlete can spot a technical weakness and not know how to make the necessary adjustments, as the clinician, your suggestions will have a much greater impact than if everything comes from you to the athlete.

To be sure the success of this approach is positively correlated to the experience of the athlete. I'm not for a moment suggesting that this modality should be employed with novice curlers.

It is not the intent of this article to regurgitate the volumes of work that has been done in the area of technical development. Delivery analysis is an art, not a science but it certainly is a coaching and instructing skill that has a sound base in a body of knowledge about the curling delivery.

But, this is where we as curling coaches tend to falter. We think that's all there is to it. Have a technically perfect delivery and you will make shots. That's not wrong, just incomplete! There is so much more to making a curling shot. But again, it is not the intent of this article to delineate the team dynamics issues that most certainly affect the ability of an athlete to perform technically. We want to remain focused on the individual who sits in the hack charged with the responsibility to "make the shot". He/she needs five more ingredients for the performance cocktail.

Arousal! Who would have thought that focus is enhanced with a modicum of physical and/or emotional arousal. Researchers at the Arizona State University stumbled upon this phenomenon studying brain wave patterns in connection with improved performance. It seemed that when electrodes were attached to the skull cap of test subjects following light, short exercise, performance not only improved but the brain wave patterns were altered as well. This change in brain wave patterns was consistent with what the researchers had already concluded about "brain balance".

I couldn't help but think of curlers like Cathy King, June Campbell, Sherry Anderson and many others who jog down the ice to make their shots. That small amount of physical arousal it now appears is a good thing!

Our next ingredient is imagery (visualization), the ability to see an action, before it occurs, in the mind's eye. The power of the mind to assist with a physical action has been documented over and over again in study after study and still we have athletes who insist that when they perform, they don't think or see anything in particular. It's not that they're incorrect, well in one sense they are, it's that they do what they need to do without being conscious of it. Nothing wrong with that! In many cases the visualization occurs well before the initial movements of the action. The positive image is there and only has to be duplicated by an action that is technically sound. Oh, there's that technical thing once again!

Before we leave the ingredient of imagery and visualization a word about mental rehearsal. I hear it constantly from athletes who play in curling venues that are very busy. Many of the athletes who are members of the National Training Center programme here in Calgary call the Calgary Curling Club home. I don't think I'm on much of a limb when I say that of all the eight-sheet curling clubs on the planet, the Calgary C.C. just might be the busiest. As a competitive curler wishing to get practice ice, it's not exactly utopia. But none of those athletes complain because they have learned the art of mental rehearsal that draws upon the ability of one to visualize (to see a picture in the mind's eye) and imagine (using all the senses at one's disposal). What makes mental rehearsal so powerful is the power of positive thinking. When one mentally rehearses an action, success is one's constant companion. When the athlete then enters the competitive environment, the last ingredient, attitude, is added automatically.

A last word about mental rehearsal, when done effectively, it's just as much work, takes just as much time and can be done with varying degrees of effort as going to the curling club and practising in the narrowest sense of the word. It's a skill that must be learned!

The next ingredient in our performance cocktail involves an image as well and in this case, it's physical.

What are you looking at? No, seriously, when you're about to perform an athletic action, what specifically are you looking at? Do you know? Do you care? Well, don't take my word for it, but you should! Let's examine the work of Dr. Joan Vickers of the University of Calgary who has done ground breaking research into what athletes in general physically see and curlers in particular.

At the time of writing of this article, her conclusions are preliminary but she feels confident through her testing of golfers, ice hockey players, basketball players, billiard players and tennis players that getting the right information at the right time is critical for success. And much of that information comes through our eyes and is sent to the brain for processing. In a nutshell, here's a summary of those conclusions.

- Don't focus too long (if you do, it can actually be a distraction).
- Focus on a specific point.
- Let the mind "see" the target and trust the power of the mind's eye.
- A quiet eye enhances the mechanics of the action (there's that technical thing again).

The above points are an oversimplification for sure but it's the essence of what we have learned about "quiet eye".

Brain balance, the next to last ingredient, just might have been foreshadowed in the early 70's by one of the recognized pioneers in the area of mental preparation, Timothy Gallwey in his publication, The Inner Game of Tennis.

He recognized that the brain is somewhat schizophrenic when it comes to motor skills. The left side of the brain is the center of reasoned thought and analysis. It's the side of the brain that allows us to learn motor skills. He referred to it as self one. It's also the part of the brain that beats up on us when we fail to perform. Self one is pushy! It always wants to play a role in a motor skill. If we let it, it can be the cause of the malaise known as the paralysis of analysis.

Self two on the other hand, is located in the right side of the brain, I like to call it the just do it side. It's the center of creativity and performance. We learn with the left side of the brain but we perform when the right side is engaged. The problem is that pushy self one. The trick is to keep self one just busy enough, then let self two perform. Mantras that athletes learn to bring the left side into play are ideal. A curler in the

Mental Preparation

hack might literally say things like, "Straight", "Smooth", "Soft" or whatever the brain requires to engage that sound, technical delivery (oops, there it is again). As the Arizona researchers concluded, the brain must be balanced! Then it's a case of trusting one's right side, self two, and just do it.

Well, we're almost home. There's one more critical ingredient to add to the performance cocktail. It's the one so many athletes ignore, not by choice but through ignorance of its importance. There is an article on the NTC web site entitled, The Most Important Piece of Equipment. I hope you might read it but I'll save you the time if it's in short supply by telling you that it's your attitude!

A negative attitude can kill all the good things in the execution of a curling shot! It's just that simple and yet the elements of one's attitude can be complex indeed. It can range from life's significant trials and tribulations to little distractions that normally would go unnoticed but in the heat of competition become, as Andrea Ronnebeck, my colleague from Kenora ON likes to say, "an elephant is in the living room", but no one wants to admit it.

We can't control or even influence many of life's challenges but we are always in total control of our reaction to them. We can look and feel like "somebody shot my dog" or we can move ahead with only positive thoughts. It's always our choice!

Most people with whom I speak about this topic of attitude buy into it rather quickly. It's a "motherhood and apple pie" scenario. But most of those individuals will ask, what the best attitude might be. It's easy really and best described in an anecdote by another highly respected colleague, Pat B. Reid in the compilation of Canadian sports stories entitled, Heroes in our Midst. In the book Pat recounts a national university curling championship where her team played what they believed to be a superior team in the final (although to that point they were both undefeated) and literally agreed to simply keep the score close rather than get blown away which is what happened to this team's other opponents. In other words, without realizing it, they "tanked". They went into the game with a losing attitude disguised as a "close game". Only on the plane trip home did Pat realize that the silver medal about which she was so initially proud, was now only a symbol of an attitude going into the contest that made winning almost impossible. No, the attitude needed is one of "challenge". It's that I can't wait to play feeling. It's not cockiness that so often leads to utter disappointment and it's certainly not being afraid to win.

Although Pat didn't say it in these words, I could read between the lines that the gold medal team didn't have to bring their "A" game nor did they have to "drain their tank" to win. That's a lesson Pat has taken into many competitions in which she has won the gold. I'll wager that her attitude in those instances was much different.

The noted sports psychologist, James Loehr, also taught us in his work researching the ideal performance state that besides one's attitude, eating to win and maintaining the highest degree of physical fitness join with attitude to keep the athlete as long as possible in the ideal performance state.

Well, there you have it, the performance cocktail. It starts with a liberal amount of technical competence. Add to that physical arousal, imagery, brain balance, a quiet eye and the right attitude. Each athlete needs all the ingredients but it's not a magic potion. It takes practice to place all the ingredients in the right amounts to fit your unique competitive make-up.

If you leave some out of the recipe, you do so at your own peril!

SUGGESTED READINGS

[The Inner Game](#) (T. Gallwey)

[The New Toughness Training for Sport](#) (J. Loehr)

[Heroes in Our Midst](#) (p.108, P. Reid)

... and related articles from www.ntc.curling.ca